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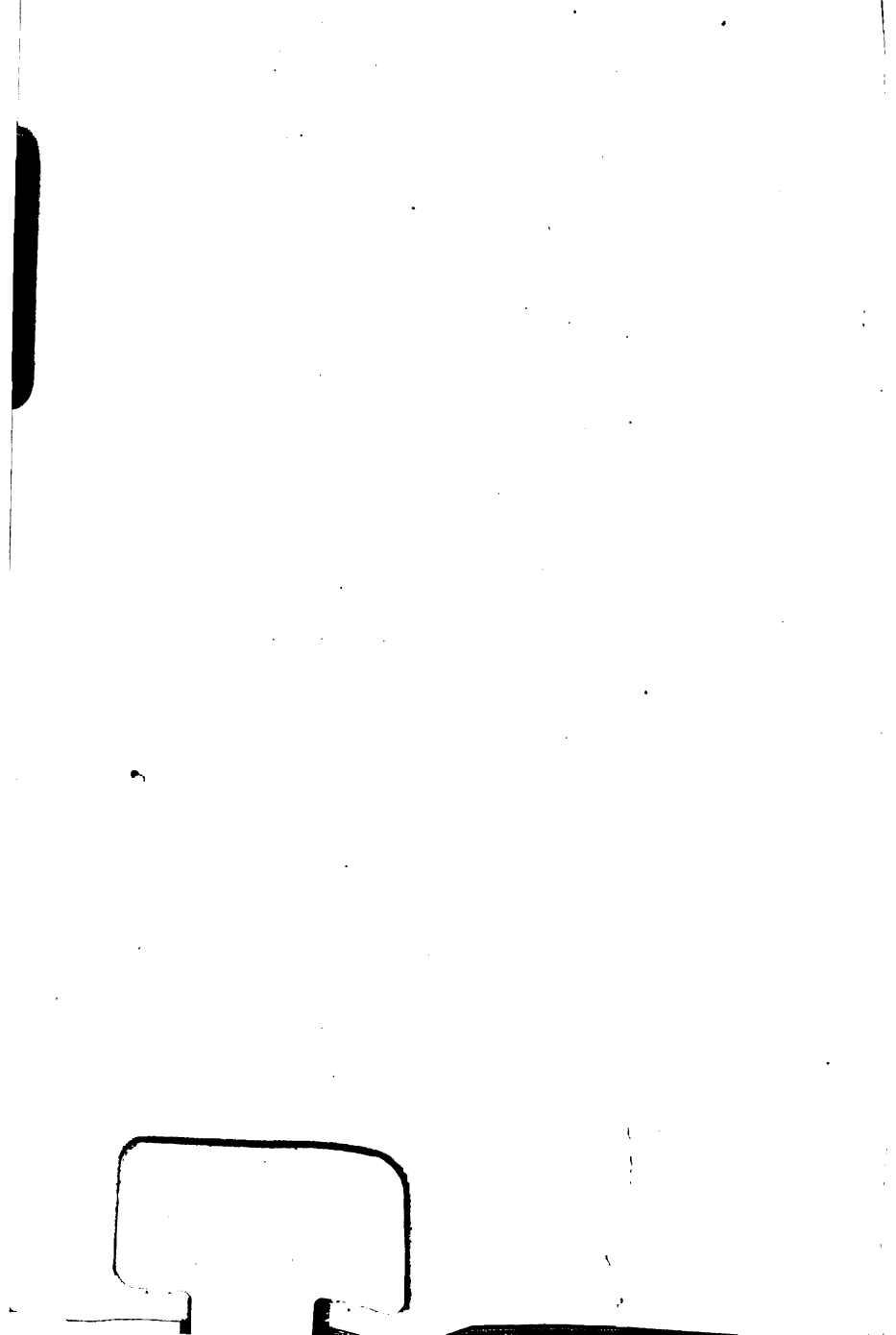
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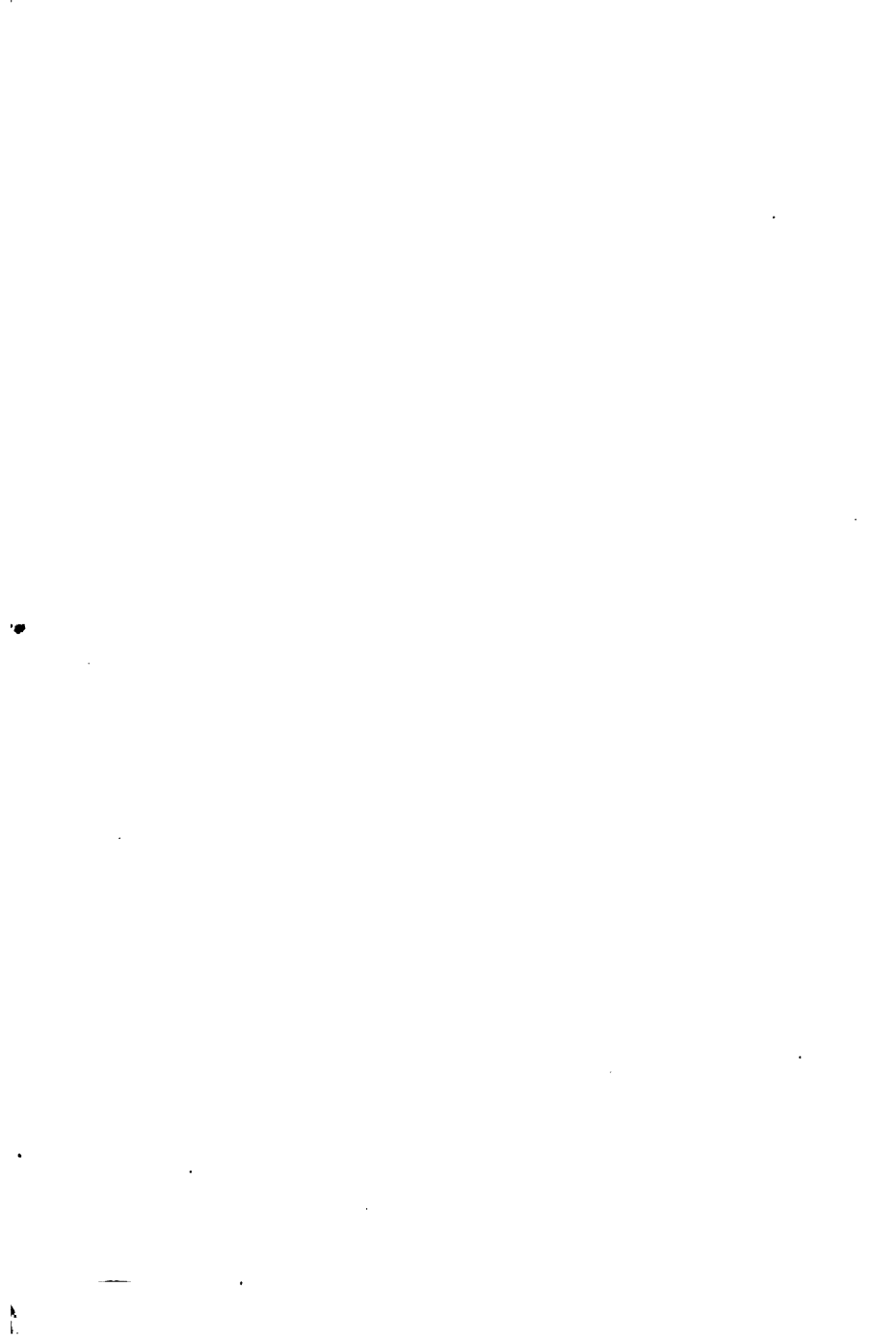
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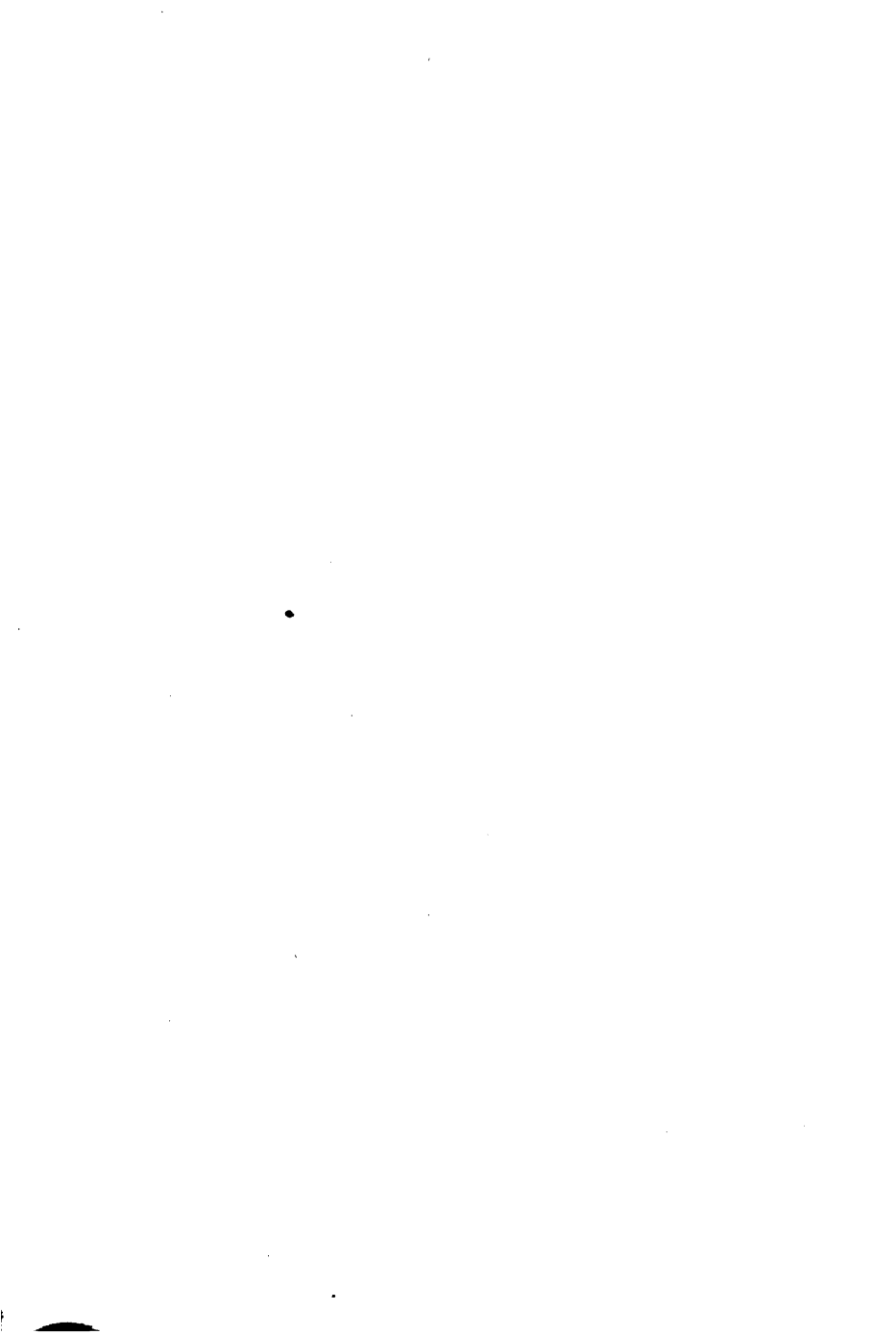


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**THE BOYS OF COLUMBIA HIGH
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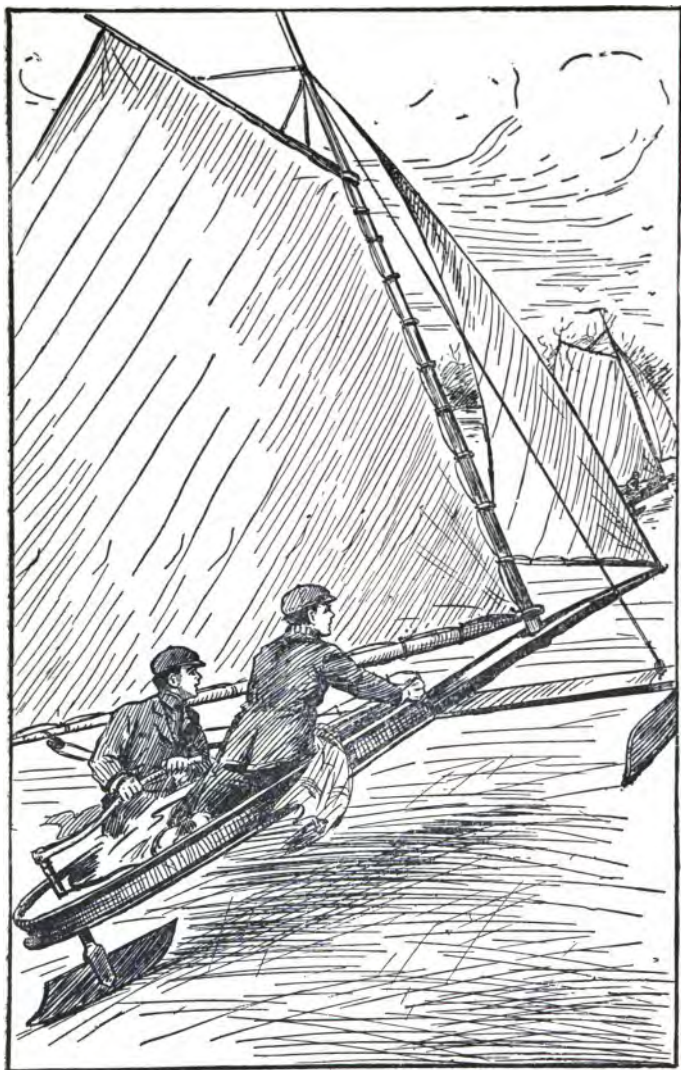


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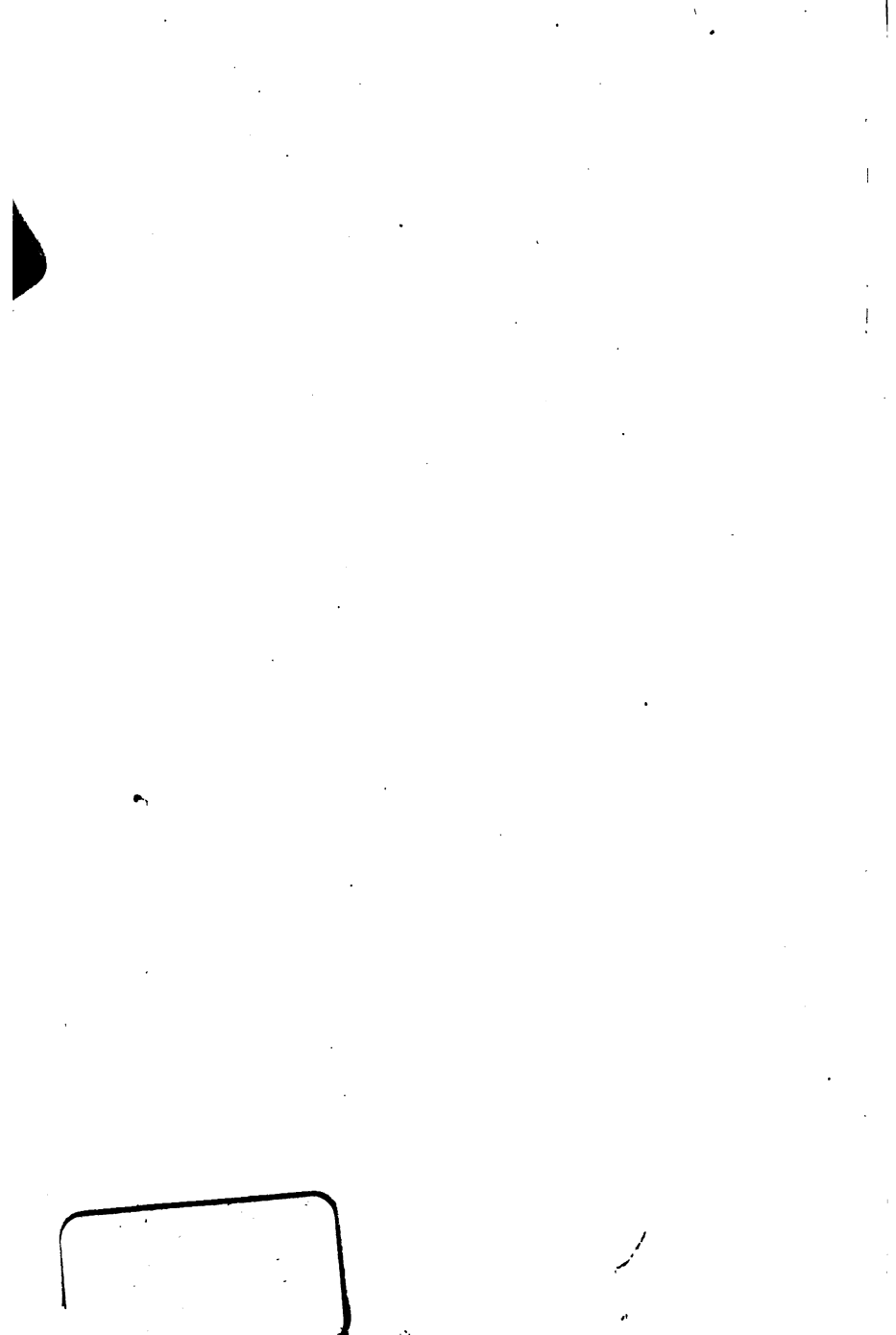
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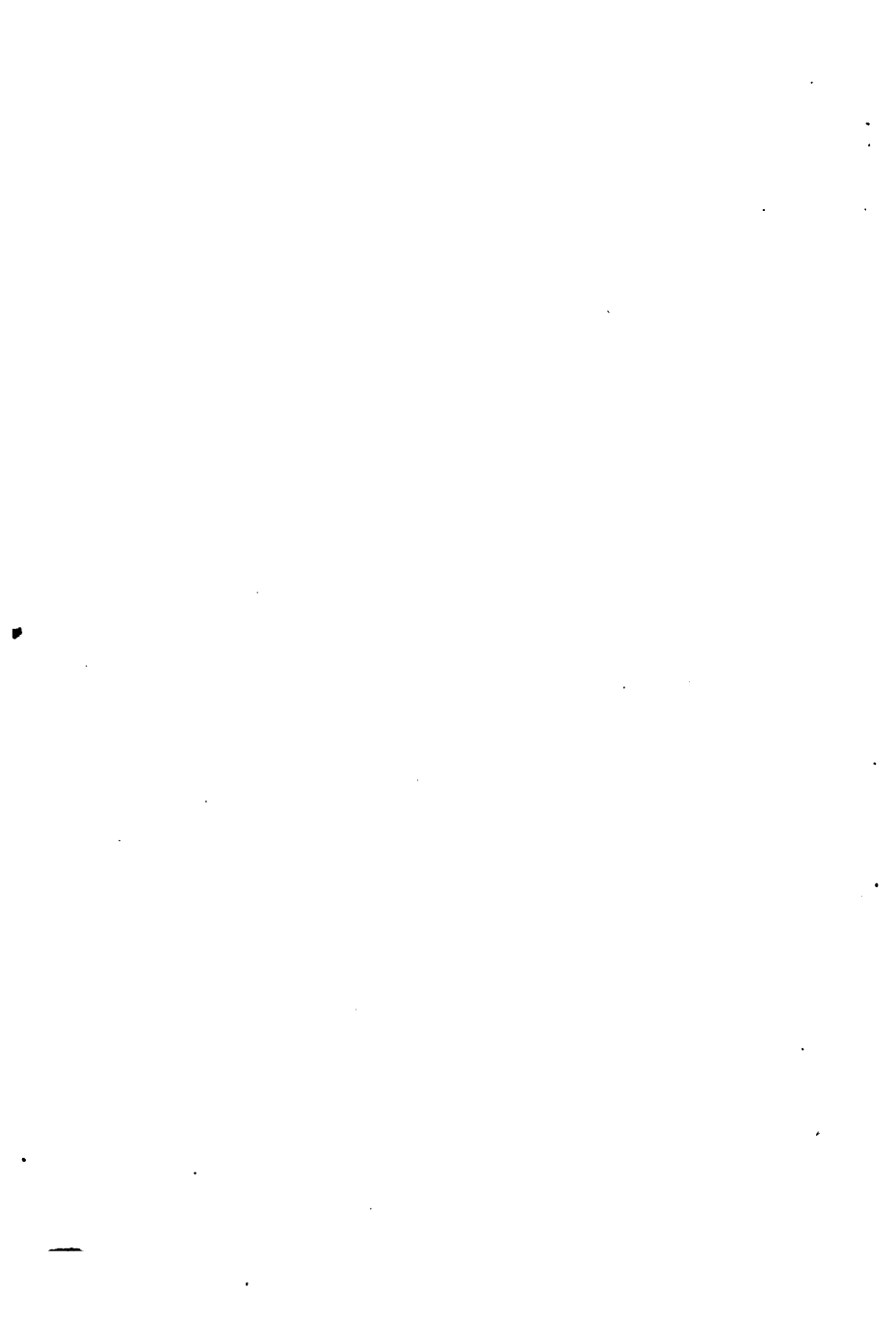
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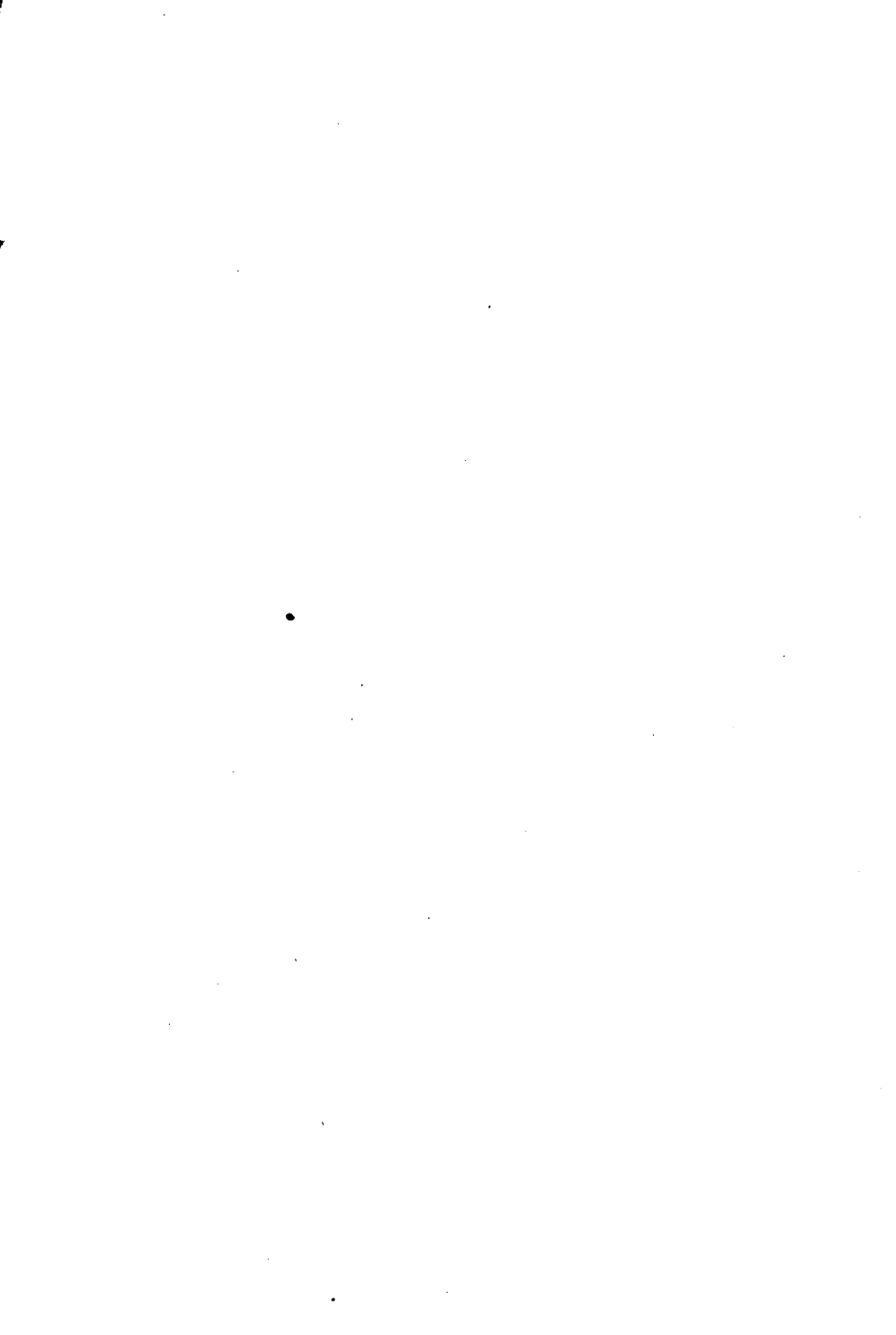


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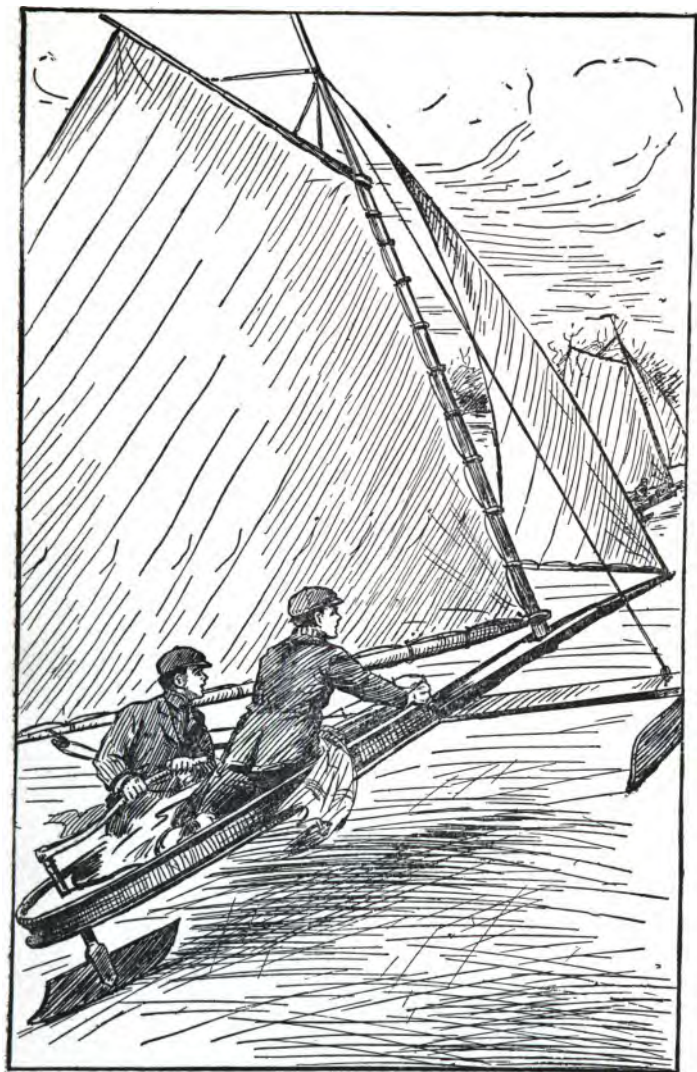


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"That's just what it means; and now you understand what all that practice with our team has been standing for," returned the boy who sat on the bank, as he again bent over his skates.

"But hold on," cried Lanky, "what's to hinder our whirling up the river to Clifford on this same contraption? Why, we can beat your best time on runners to flinders. No more arguing now, but hop aboard, and we're off!"

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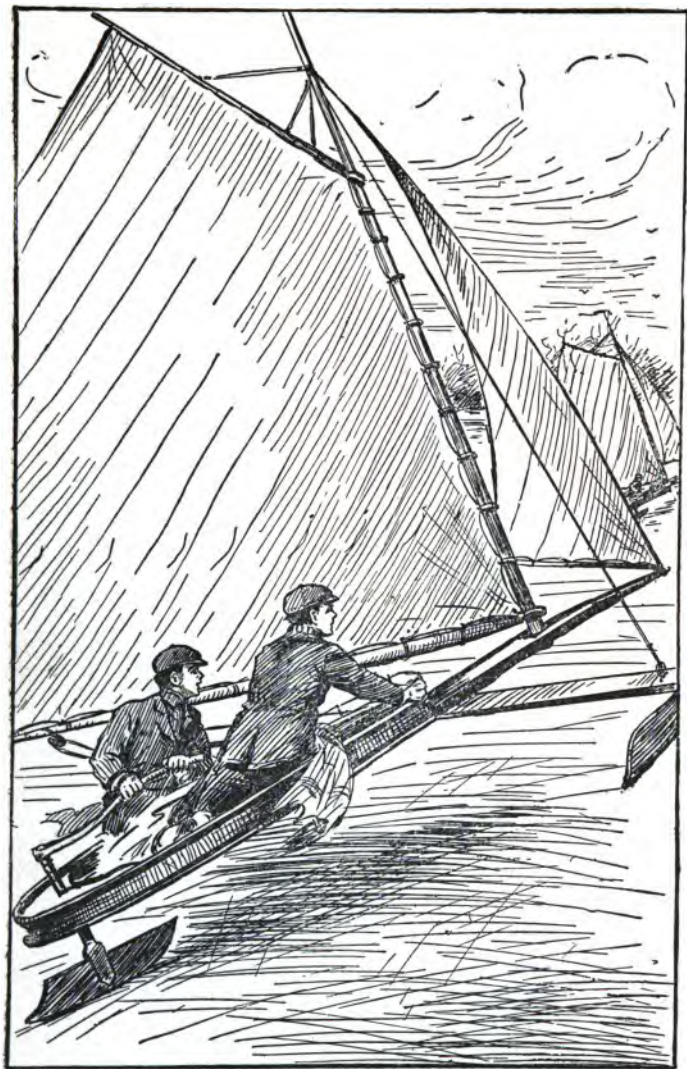
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As they began to move off under the influence of the dying breeze a number of the skaters gave utterance to loud cries, and made out as if about to give them a race. The fleetest of them quickly fell astern, however, and presently a bend in the river shut them completely out of sight.

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and what aims and ambitions influenced their actions.

The Harrapin boasted of three progressive towns along its banks, each ranging from seven to twenty thousand inhabitants. Columbia was the largest, though Bellport some eight miles further down the river possessed numerous factories, and was a business community.

Each town had its own high school, that of Columbia being especially famous on account of its almost perfect equipment. Between the scholars of the three seats of learning there naturally arose a most persistent rivalry, and from year to year this was carried on in all the sports which up-to-date American boys enjoy.

In the first volume of this series, "Boys of Columbia High; or, The All Around Rivals of the School" will be found many interesting, as well as thrilling, encounters, in which victory was only won after a bitter struggle.

With the coming of balmy Spring the sports of course took on an outdoor flavor, and consequently the second story had to deal with that truly American National sport, baseball, under the title of "The Boys of Columbia High On the Diamond; or Winning Out By Pluck."

The arrival of a new eight-oared shell for the boat club of the school brought both delight and

alarm in its train. If you want to experience all the sensation of being present on the beautiful Har-rapin on that Glorious Fourth when the wonderful water carnival was celebrated, and read of the astonishing things that happened to the rival students, then read the third volume of the series, which is called "The Boys of Columbia High On the River; or, The Boat Race Plot That Failed."

Vacation over, and with the coming of the two hundred and fifty scholars back to the charge of Professor Tyson Parke and his able assistants, of course the tang of the sharp, early Fall air brought one subject forward. What this was you can readily guess by the title of the fourth book in the series, preceding the present volume: "The Boys of Columbia High On the Gridiron; or The Struggle for the Silver Cup."

Frank Allen was the son of the proprietor of Columbia's great department store. He had one sister, Helen, just a couple of years younger than himself. Lanky Wallace, who had played a prominent part in all the sports through which the school had this year won imperishable renown, was the son of a banker, who was also a lawyer, and meant to follow in his father's footsteps later on.

When the bend above Columbia had been turned, there lay a pretty straight course up to Rattail Island, which was situated about half way between Frank's

home town and Clifford. There was not a single skater in sight, as the afternoon had waned, and the lapse of time had caused a gradual retreat to a point nearer home.

"Hurrah!" shouted Lanky, as he guided the spinning craft along over the even surface of the famous little stream; "isn't this the limit? We own the whole river! How does she compare with the clumsy old *Hurricane*, Frank?"

"Not at all," came the quick reply.

"Why, whatever do you mean?" gasped the disappointed builder, reproachfully.

"There isn't any comparison," laughed Frank, "she's in a class by herself, Lanky! Given some breeze, and I reckon she'd just hit the high places of the ice. She's like a thistledown floating along. You've sure gone and done it with this dandy craft."

"Bully for you, old fellow! You make me feel good all over. Say, what's that?" and Lanky stretched his neck in the effort to see ahead.

"Looks like a sail behind that point. As sure as you live it's moving! There's another ice-boat coming out at a whooping pace!" exclaimed Frank, his voice filled with both satisfaction and wonder.

"Wow! now, what do you think of that for luck? Why, of course it's Lef Seller and his blessed tub the *Harrapin Flier*! He beat me every time last year, and he's just been laying for me in that cove,

meaning to show me a clean pair of heels to-day. It's going to be a race, Frank! There he comes out, and he's got Bill Klemm along with him, as usual!"

"He's heading up the river, Lanky. That's a challenge for you. Are you going to stand for it?" demanded Frank, who, like the vast majority of boys, never liked to let a plain dare pass by without accepting it.

"Watch me haul up on him hand over fist! Before we're past Rattail Island this little darling is going to make the *Harrapin Flier* look like thirty cents. She's a has-been, and belongs to a slow age!" said the skipper, jauntily.

He shifted his weight and asked Frank to do the same. In so doing the result was immediately shown in an accelerated pace on the part of the ice-boat; either that, or else a slant of fresh wind caught her sail, coming from out behind that same cove where the rival craft had been hidden.

Up the river they flew like a pair of frightened gulls; only such salt water birds were never seen around the neighborhood of Columbia.

Both skippers seemed to be jockeying for all the advantage there was to be had in position. The river was well known to Lanky, and he had been over this course so many times in every kind of water craft that he was familiar with each little

turn; and not only the sweep of the current in summer, but the passages in the wooded shores through which squalls of wind might be expected to swoop down.

"We're gaining!" declared Frank, almost immediately, when both ice-boats had taken a straight-away course, so that comparisons could be made.

"Are we? I should say yes, and just creeping up on the duffer so fast that he'll soon look like he's standing still! Why, I could cut circles around that ancient tub. To the woodpile with her, Lef; that's all she's good for!" and he raised his voice in a taunting shout that must have stung the ears of the chagrined owner of the rival boat.

"They're trying to move around some, I notice; shifting their ballast to coax a little more speed out of the thing," announced Frank, quickly.

"No good trying. I've got the Injun sign on that boat, as sure as you're born. This pays up for all his joshing last year. *Now* will you be good, Lef? You had an idea you would show me up, hey? Well, you've got another think coming, that's all."

They were now so close to the leading ice-boat that even an ordinary call could have been heard. Lef, who was quite a stalwart lad, did not dare look back, for fear lest he lost control of his craft, which was flying along at quite some speed, con-

sidering the light breeze. But his companion kept tab on all the movements of the pursuer, and posted him constantly.

"There's the island ahead, Lanky. Which channel are you going to take?" asked the passenger of the *Humming Bird*.

"The one to the left of course," came the ready reply. "Think me so green as that, with the breeze coming from the west? A fellow would get blanketed by the trees on the island if he chose the other side. And ten to one Lef knows that too. See, I told you so; he's already heading that way."

"But that channel is only half as wide as the other, and unless you are mighty careful you'll come to a bad end in there. I hope we don't try to pass Lef before we get up above the island," added Frank, with a suspicion of impending trouble making itself felt in his voice, though as a rule he seldom winced when difficulties arose.

"We're climbing up on him fast," declared Lanky, grinning, "but I don't think we'll pass him while in the narrow part of the river; so there ain't going to be any mix-up, unless——"

"Unless what?" asked his chum, instantly.

"He might be mad enough to want to upset us in a heap, hoping to smash my jolly little hew boat. It would be just like Lef Seller, and his rule or ruin policy of running things. All the same I don't

take that other passage, and let him crow over me; nixy not. Now for it, my hearty!"

The island was at hand, looming up gloomy and forbidding on the right. At that moment the pursuing boat did not seem to be more than a dozen feet behind the one in the lead, and with every second even this distance was being wiped out.

"Watch him!" exclaimed Frank, as he felt sure he saw a furtive movement on the part of the tricky skipper of the *Harrapin Flier* that told of desperation.

Hardly had the words left his lips than Lanky gave a shout. There was reason for excitement, yes, and even consternation; for Lef Sellers, knowing that his ice-boat could no longer be looked upon as the queen of the river, had deliberately thrown his tiller in such fashion that the craft just ahead swerved from her course and was thrown directly across the bows of the oncoming *Humming Bird*.

A crash was inevitable, despite the frantic efforts of Lanky Wallace to avoid a collision that might mean the wrecking of his jaunty little craft even in the moment of her triumph!

CHAPTER II

THE CLIFFORD SEVEN GET A CHALLENGE

CRASH !

Frank had acted on the spur of the moment, and torn the halliards loose from the cleat that held them, so that the sail of the ice-boat dropped just at the very second she plunged into the side of the other craft.

Instantly there was a great confusion, mingled with the sound of breaking planks and loud, angry cries. Strange to say Lanky's boat came through the smash with hardly any damage, while the offending craft was reduced to almost a jumble of mast, sails and thin splintered boards, in the midst of which the two reckless boys found themselves huddled.

Immediately all of them commenced crawling out of the mess. Lef was holding his hand to his face, endeavoring to quench the flow of blood from his bruised nose ; while Bill Klemm's usually sarcastic countenance looked doubly grim as he grunted,

and rubbed his leg where it had been rudely jolted in the collision.

"Now see what you've done, Lanky Wallace! You'll have to pay me for that damage as sure as you live!" roared Lef, dancing around in his impotent anger, and shedding gore copiously.

"Will I, nit," mocked the other, as he anxiously turned his gaze upon the bow of his own craft, to ascertain the extent of the damage. "It was all your fault, and you know it. Why, you deliberately turned square across our course! You just *wanted* this to happen, because it was settled that the old *Flier* had to take a back seat. You got all you deserved, and I don't feel sorry a bit."

"Here, take my handkerchief, Lef, and try and stop that bleeding. Work your jaws hard, and throw your head back, breathing through your nose," and Frank as he spoke stepped forward with the honest intention of rendering such aid to the injured as lay in his power.

"Mind your own business, Frank Allen!" spluttered the wounded boy, furiously, as he reached for his own handkerchief, and glared at the pair before him, with a malicious look in his eyes. "If it wasn't that I'm knocked out by your nasty work I'd feel like pitching in and giving you what you deserve, Lanky Wallace!"

"Oh! is that so!" jered the party threatened,

cheerfully; "well, make your mind easy about that, for I'm to be found any old day, and I know the boss place to adjourn for a fight. Frank, shall we go on our way? That errand of yours in Clifford is important, and we've got no more time to waste with these duffers."

"Huh! talk's cheap, with some fellers," shouted Lef, angrily. "Make up your mind you've just got to pay me the full value of that boat. I'll go and see your father about it. My word against yours, and Bill here will back me up against Frank. You did it on purpose! You hated my boat because it beat you every time last winter, that's what."

"You wouldn't dare," replied Lanky; for like every one connected with a lawyer's household, going to law was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Won't, hey? You just wait and see," declared Lef, bitterly. "My word's as good as yours, and there ain't no witness, you know!"

"Oh, yes there is," said a voice just then; and the boys turned to survey with some surprise a figure that stood close by, near the shore of the island.

He was apparently a tramp, though his bearded face just then bore a smile, and did not look unprepossessing at all.

"I happened to be fishin' right here, through a hole in the ice," this party continued, as he advanced, "and I saw all the racket. That feller Lef deliber-

ately swung his boat across the bow of the other. He done it on purpose. He saw he was gettin' beat, and wanted to bust everything up higher than a kite. I'm right glad he was the only one to get it in the neck."

Lef scowled at the speaker as though he felt he would like to spring upon him, and do some hammering with his fists. But the fisherman seemed to be quite a husky chap, although privation had stamped a look of hunger on his bronzed face.

Lanky stared at him, too, a puzzled expression coming over his countenance, as though he could not for the life of him tell where he had seen this stranger before.

"And who are you?" demanded Lef, still glaring at the other as if he considered him an interloper. "I don't ever remember meeting you before. Guess you must belong in Clifford. Better keep there, and not come nosing around Columbia where you ain't wanted."

"Where can I find you, in case you're needed as a witness?" asked Lanky, exhibiting a bit of the shrewdness that had made his father the best-known lawyer in the county.

"Well, you see, just at present I'm fishing right here. That's my shack over yonder on the island. 'Taint much of a place, but then beggars oughtn't be choosers, they say, and it keeps me from freez-

ing to death. Reckon I'll hang out nigh here a little spell, always waitin' and hopin' for somethin' to turn up."

Frank could detect a trace of bitterness in the voice of the tramp. Somehow it aroused his curiosity very much. There was certainly something bordering on the pathetic in the spasm of pain that flashed across his thin face as he said these last few words, "waitin' and hopin' for somethin' to turn up!"

Lanky kept staring at him, and shaking his head. He had not uttered a single word since the tramp fisherman appeared on the scene; so that it was Frank who presently took him by the arm and led him to the side of the ice-boat, saying:

"I don't think she's been hurt any, Lanky; suppose we make a fresh start. It's to be hoped we won't meet with any more adventures on the way, because that challenge has just got to be delivered to-day, sure!"

"Challenge! What's that?" exclaimed Lef, shooting a quick look in the direction of his crony, Bill Klemm, who was still grunting; and rubbing his left leg, with a sour expression on his face.

Without paying more attention to the disgruntled skipper of the broken ice-boat, both Lanky and his chum climbed aboard the *Humming Bird*, the sail was pulled aloft, and with a quick movement Frank

tied another length of cord to that which he had broken in his frantic efforts to prevent a collision.

All this while his mate was turning his head again and again to glance toward the man; who did not seem to particularly fancy such scrutiny, for he kept his back toward them under the pretense of watching the other boys.

"My name's Frank Allen, and his is Lanky Wallace. We belong in Columbia. Perhaps if you get hard pushed we might be able to do something for you. If you happened to ask for me how'd I know it was you?"

Of course in calling out in this manner, Frank was only trying to get a line on the name of the lone fisherman who was seeking the bass and pickerel known to frequent the deep waters near Rattail Island.

"Call me Bill," muttered the man, after a brief hesitation; and Frank somehow concluded that this could hardly be his real name.

"No doubt he's ashamed of his own, or else don't want his folks to know he ever sank so low as this," was what Frank said to his chum, after they had once more started along the up-river course.

"Oh! shucks! what ails me? One second I think I've got it, and when I start to say it, blessed if the pesky thing don't seem to just slip away from me.

I never had anything happen to me so dopey," muttered Lanky, fiercely.

"What's that?" demanded Frank, his curiosity excited, of course.

"Why, that fellow, you know—seems like I've seen him somewhere or other, at some time, and yet for the life of me I can't just clinch it. Every time I think I've got hold of it the thing slips away like an eel. I tell you I'll never be happy till I've remembered where I saw him," went on Lanky, who was a most determined fellow, obstinate he had often been called.

"Oh! I wouldn't bother my head about that. What does it matter, when the chances are you'll never set eyes on him again? These hoboos are here to-day and gone to-morrow. And I guess he is a tramp, all right, eh, Lanky?" went on Frank, as he turned one last look at the group alongside the island.

"Sure," replied the other, cheerfully. "But somehow I seemed to get a notion he was a little above the general run of hoboos. Mebbe it was his voice when he said he was waiting for something to turn up. What d'ye suppose he's expecting to come along? Do hoboos dream of millionaires dying and leaving them cash?"

"Perhaps they do. I hope Lef and Bill don't make up their minds to jump on him and try to get

rid of some of their bile that way," ventured Frank, as a spur of land, jutting out from the shore, shut off a view of the channel that ran to the westward of Rattail Island.

At that Lanky laughed mockingly.

"Let 'em try it, that's all! Why, that hobo could just wipe up the ice with the pair of them, and then not half try. Oh! no, don't you forget it, Frank, Lef Seller's too cunning a fellow to take chances. He can talk pretty loud, but when it comes to fight, he generally squirms out of the rumpus."

"Still, it took considerable grit to deliberately throw his boat across our bows. Somebody might have been badly hurt in the smash-up," remarked Frank.

"Yep. But that came to him like a flash," his chum said, as he changed their course. "He never had time to think twice, or my word for it, he wouldn't have done the job. That was impulse. Even a coward will sometimes have a flash of what looks like courage; but it's only desperation. You know how a cornered rat will show its teeth, and fight."

"Perhaps you're right, Lanky. I'm glad for your sake the boat wasn't hurt much. She seems to scoot along just as well as ever."

"But what we did to the poor old *Harrapin Flier* wouldn't do to tell. It's to the scrap heap for her

after that beat. But I wish I could remember where I saw that Bill," went on Lanky with another shake of his head, and a sigh.

Frank laughed aloud.

"Well, you're a queer duck, Lanky, I must say. As long as that thing is bothering you, I suppose you'll lose your appetite, and not take any interest in other happenings. What does it amount to, anyhow? Forget it, and try to imagine what a roar will go up from the Clifford fellows when they hear that Columbia challenges their hockey team the second day after Christmas, wind and weather permitting, for the championship of the famous old Harrapin."

"Well, we're almost there now," observed Lanky, "and soon we'll find out for ourselves what these gay chaps of Clifford have to say about it. Look there, and you'll see the ice fairly covered with skaters. They do run things up here different from the way we do, and I've heard outsiders say the best skaters in the State can be found right here in little old Clifford. It's a craze with them."

Loud shouts ahead attested to the fact that the skaters had discovered the advancing ice-boat, and hailed its coming with delight. Presently, as Lanky described a graceful curve, and brought the fleet craft to a standstill, with her nose heading toward

the west where the breeze hailed from, scores of boys and girls gathered around.

"Where's Hastings?" asked Frank, as he stepped onto the ice.

"Here! who wants me?" called a voice, and the captain of the Clifford High School football eleven, as well as leader in all athletic sports Clifford boasted, came skating up, carrying a fine hockey stick made of selected Canadian rock elm.

"Why, hello, Allen!" he went on, holding out a hand to each; "and you, too, Wallace. This is mighty nice in you coming up to call on us. If you'd only been a little earlier you might have seen a rattling game between the regulars and a picked seven. It was fast playing all the way through, and if we did win we had little to crow over. Still, two of our best players were away, and it always makes a hole in a team to put on substitutes not accustomed to the play."

"I've got something that I was commissioned to give you, Hastings," and Frank as he spoke drew out an envelope, while the skaters gathered near, despite the suspicious crackling of the strong ice.

Hastings tore off the end of the envelope. As soon as he had read the contents of the enclosure a grin of pleasure spread all over his face. Turning, he looked to the right and to the left at the

hockey players and others who had gathered around the ice-boat from below.

"Listen, fellows," he observed. "What d'ye think? We're challenged to a match by the Columbia High Hockey Team the second day beyond Christmas, or as soon after that as the weather permits. Shall we accept? All in favor say aye!"

And immediately there burst forth a shout that made the echoes ring from both sides of the Harra-pin. Frank looked at his companion.

"Say, Lanky," he observed, when the tumult had in a measure subsided, "it looks like we would have our work cut out for us to beat this fast seven, eh?"

"But don't forget, Frank, that this is still Columbia's year," said Lanky, sturdily.

CHAPTER III

BILL

"THREE cheers for Columbia!"

"Oh! ain't they got the nerve, though!"

"The pitcher that goes to the well once too often gets busted at last! They've carried everything with a swoop so far this year; but the dark days have come! Oh! you Columbia! I'm sorry for you!"

"Tell 'em yes, Captain Hastings! Don't keep the gentlemen in such suspense!"

"Yes, they might get cold feet if you hesitate too long. We're hungry, and we must have a bone; a Columbia bone will answer all right!"

Frank and Lanky listened to these and various other cries with amusement. They knew that back of it all the boys of Clifford were quite a sportsman-like set; and believed in fair treatment for an honorable foe.

True, they had allowed themselves to be beguiled into nibbling at a betrayal of the Columbia signals, and several of the football team had, after

losing the game, declared that it served them right, as they had no business to allow themselves to descend to such a depth; but as a rule they had always stood out for clean sport.

"Glad to see the idea pleases you, fellows. If the Clifford athletic committee see fit to accept this challenge, we intend to try and give your champion team as good a fight as we know how," Frank called out, laughing at the same time.

"Bully boy!"

"Three cheers for Frank Allen, the best all-around athlete that Columbia has!"

But Frank instantly threw up his hand.

"I object seriously to that, fellows! I'm one of a lot. I try to do my duty as I see it; but so do all my comrades. Please include every lover of clean sport in Columbia High when you give those cheers. I'd be better satisfied," he said.

"That's right! Frank's modest, but we like him all the better for it. Three cheers, then, boys, for our next victims; including the generous Allen!"

Whereupon they were given with a hearty will, amid much merriment and good natured chaffing, such as all boys delight in.

"Wish you luck, Allen. You carried off the baseball laurels; then gobbled the prizes in the boating carnival; and only recently beat both Clifford and Bellport on the gridiron; but we think you're

up against a snag when you try to snatch the hockey championship from the fellows who have held it five years!" remarked Hastings.

"When will you let us know, Hastings?" Frank asked.

The other looked around.

"The sooner the better, I suppose. I believe the entire committee, with two exceptions, is present. Suppose I call a meeting right away. Could you hold up half an hour or so?" he asked.

"Afraid we'll back down? But perhaps our fellows are just as anxious to have the challenge accepted as you are. What say, Lanky; shall we hold over, so as to lay the acceptance before our committee to-night?"

"Why not? There's the moon to give us light when the sun fails. If the breeze doesn't die out completely we can get back by hook or crook. I say stay," declared the owner of the ice-boat, vehemently; for Lanky dearly loved a stubborn contest, and the idea of wresting the title of hockey champions from the boys of Clifford High School appealed strongly to his nature.

"All right. Will you come up to our rooms then? I'll get the committee together here on the ice, and we can go in a bunch. A few formalities have to be gone through with, you know," said Hastings.

"You go, Frank; I'll stay with the boat," suggested Lanky.

Although Hastings volunteered to get some fellow to guard the craft against any vandalism on the part of inquisitive youngsters of the town, Lanky was too fond of his recent triumph in the line of ice craft to desert it.

"I'll be chatting with some of the fellows. Go along, Frank, and settle matters. I'm not needed, anyhow. So-long, Hastings, and ditto Gentle, Coots and McQuirk," saying which Lanky dismissed them with a wave of the hand, and proceeded to bandy words with the remainder of the bunch.

Of course the boys of Clifford knew the tall Columbia student. They had seen him in action many a time, playing on the rival baseball team, holding down his place in the eight-oared shell that carried Frank's crowd to victory, and filling a difficult position on the victorious football eleven.

So they were glad to chat with him, and jolly him on the nerve his crowd had in sending a challenge to the undisputed champions of hockey along the Har-rapin River.

Half an hour went by, and still no Frank.

"It's moonlight for us, I plainly see," remarked Lanky, as he cast a look up at the sky, where a pretty fair-sized queen of the night rode in all her splendor.

Most of the skaters had left the ice, in bunches of twos and threes. With the coming of night, a warm supper lured them home. Doubtless many would return again, for these Clifford young folks were almost as devoted to the sports of winter as the people of Holland, and pursued them with astonishing zeal.

Finally a hurrying figure came down the bank from the town where a myriad of lights now shone merrily.

"Hello! Lanky, still on deck, and not frozen? Sorry to keep you waiting so long, but they had a lot of formalities to go through with. And then the acceptance had to be written out, and a copy kept. Everything O. K. here?" asked Frank, as he joined his chum.

"Couldn't be better. Then you've got it along, Frank?" asked Lanky, who had immediately set to work hoisting the sail of the ice-boat, preparatory to starting on the return run down-river.

"Safe in my pocket; so that job's done," laughed the other.

"The worst is yet to come, mister!" remarked an urchin standing by, eager to see how the strange craft was manipulated.

"Well, now, you never spoke truer words, my boy, and we ought to know it. But nothing venture, nothing have; and we're bound to give Clifford a run

for their money, wind and weather permitting. Ready here, Lanky!"

"All right. Good-night, fellows. When you see us again it will be with blood in our eyes. Be kind to yourselves, and don't do too much shouting until after you've sent us home, like dogs with their tails between their legs," and Lanky gave a quick turn to the framework on steel runners that threw the sail into the breeze,

So they started on the return trip to Columbia, with the precious acceptance of their challenge safe and sound in Frank's inner pocket.

"Mighty little air stirring," remarked Frank, even while they began to slowly glide along over the smooth surface of the river, heading south.

"Yes. I'm some dubious myself whether we can make it; or if we'll have to kick our way over the last half. Still, it takes only a faint puff of air to keep an ice-boat moving, you know," remarked Lanky.

"Of course, because there's no resistance, as in the case of a boat in the water. This is good enough, if it only keeps up; we'll be home in short order," and as he spoke Frank gazed admiringly at the moonlit shores of the romantic stream, for the Har-rapin was bordered in many places with the primeval woods, though in others farms ran down to the edge of the water.

'After leaving Clifford they saw not a single skater. It seemed as though they owned the whole river, up and down. The musical murmur of the steel runners on the ice was the only sound to be heard.

"Say, a fellow could easily imagine that he was away off in some wilderness, if it wasn't for the lights along the shore in places," suggested the skipper of the little *Humming Bird*, as they moved majestically along.

"Or the rumble of that freight train pulling uphill over yonder," said Frank.

"Oh! that could be called the roar of distant surf on the beach. It sounds like it, all right," remarked his chum.

"That's a fact, it does. Makes me think of the last time I was spending a summer on the beach. Careful now, Lanky; there's Rattail Island ahead of us. Which channel are you going to take now?"

"Same as before. You wouldn't find a ripple of a zephyr on the east side, and we'd have to paddle past with our feet," answered the skipper, heading his gliding craft toward the point in question.

"I can see a light on the shore of the island. Yes, it's a fire, all right. That must be Bill cooking his fish supper," remarked Frank, as they swung around the point of the island, and began to move between it and the main shore.

"Bill—Bill what? Hang the luck if I ever had a thing worry me like that seems to do," grumbled Lanky.

"Hello! at it again, are you? I believe that nonsense is going to keep you from enjoying a decent sleep to-night. Better try and curb that weakness, old chap. It will get you into no end of trouble, mentally," warned his comrade; at the same time secretly chuckling, for he knew Lanky could not change his nature any more than the leopard might his spots.

"Yes, there he is, cooking over the blazing fire. Bill may have been a tramp, but it strikes me I could give him a few pointers how best to make a fire when there's any cooking to be done. Give me the red embers, and the steady fierce heat. Are you going to hail him, Frank?"

"He's shading his hand to look out this way, already. I reckon he hears the click of our steel on the ice, for you know how sound carries when the river is frozen," and then raising his voice, Frank called: "Hello! there, Bill; getting grub ready?"

The tramp laughed as he answered back:

"She's done to a turn, boys. Hey, Lanky, if you want me to give evidence, you'll find me right here for some days!"

"All right, Bill. Say, those fellows didn't tackle you for what you said, did they?" asked the ice-boat

skipper, as they passed the tramp's camp and shack.

"Well, I guess not! They'd have had a sweet time of it if they tried to climb me, I tell you, Lanky," came the answer floating after them.

Then a wooded spur of land shut out the fire from view.

"Say, did you notice how glib he called my name? Just like Lanky was natural to him all his life. But Bill—that's such a common name, how can I ever pound my head enough to tell where I saw him before. Bill—Billy—I don't seem to make connections at all. It's a case of being stumped, sure," muttered the disconsolate one, as he continued to pay attention to the movements of the gliding boat.

The night breeze was not only faint but fickle. Sometimes it came directly out of the west, and then suddenly the sail would flap as though it had veered into the southwest, necessitating a change of course, diagonally across the river, in order to make progress.

"Slow work," grunted Lanky, presently.

"Yes, but sure. We're not much more than a mile out of town now. If the wind died altogether we could push her along easily to your boathouse," observed his companion, always optimistic in his outlook.

"Yes, but I'd give a cookey to remember where I ever met that Bill. Oh! shucks! but ain't it just too

mean for anything. There—I was just about to say the rest of it. Bill—Bill—when it slipped up on me—Smith, Jones, Brown, whatever can it be?”

Frank laughed derisively at the persistence of his friend.

“I see that nobody is going to have any peace till you bark up that name. Wish I could help you out; but as it happens I don’t seem to feel the same way. If I ever met him before it was when he looked different from what he does now.”

“There! perhaps that may be the key to unlock the closed door. You’ve given me an idea that may do the trick. There’s that wind heading us off again, so that I’ve got to tack to get on. But it’s jolly good fun, anyhow. Whoop! what’s happened?”

Lanky let out a yell with these last words. Even the steady Frank experienced a sudden thrill; for the ice-boat was brought up with an abrupt shock, and her tall mast, sail and all went crashing down over the starboard side, narrowly missing striking the crouching skipper in its descent!

CHAPTER IV

WHEN THE ATHLETIC COMMITTEE MET

"WRECKED in sight of port! Was there ever such luck?" groaned Lanky Wallace, as he picked himself up, having rolled off the tilting ice-boat upon the smooth surface of the frozen Harrapin.

Frank was already scrambling to his feet.

"Well, I declare, that's mighty funny!" he was muttering, as he looked at the wreck of the once proud and towering mast, now dragging over the side of the sadly demoralized craft.

"What hit us? You see we're away off from the shore, and for the life of me I can't see any rock or other obstruction on the ice. It's as smooth as velvet back where we tumbled. And that mast was strong enough to hold a big blow. Can you get on to the secret, Frank?" begged Lanky, rubbing his elbow ruefully.

"The thing upset, all right, but didn't you notice that she seemed to rear up like a horse on its hind legs. Say, come back here a little to where it

happened. We've been carried past, on account of our momentum. Now, this was about the very spot where the cyclone struck us," and Frank drew his chum along until they had retreated a dozen or more yards.

"Well, show me! I must be blind, for outside of that rug which we dumped, bless my eyes if I can see anything here that would kick us that way," and rubbing his knuckles into his eyes Lanky stared around.

"That's so, as far as the ice is concerned; but I think I've caught on to the answer to the puzzle," remarked Frank, with a touch of sudden anger in his voice.

"Then tell me about it. I'm just dying for information. It's bad enough to be worrying about that Bill mystery without having another shoved on me. What turned us turtle, and snapped off my beautiful mast like a pipe stem, eh?"

"Look up and see!" remarked Frank, grimly.

No sooner had the startled Lanky done so than he gave utterance to a cry of astonishment and chagrin.

"Why, what's that? As sure as I live it looks like a cable stretched across the river in this narrow place. How did we ever come to miss it before when we came up?" he ejaculated.

"We didn't have to. You know as well as I do

that if that cable had been there we'd have seen it; and neither of us did," replied Frank, gravely.

"Do you mean—ginger! somebody must have put it there since we went up! Is that what you mean, Frank?" cried Lanky.

"Doesn't it stand to reason? Perhaps you might even guess who'd be most likely to play such a nasty trick as this?" went on the other.

"Lef Seller and Bill Klemm! Of course it was them! They knew we'd be coming back this way, and meant to upset us, perhaps smash my boat. Where'd they ever get the cable, do you suppose?" Lanky asked, perhaps a trifle stunned by the enormity of the prank indulged in by those under discussion.

"Wake up, Lanky, and think," said Frank, energetically. "Don't you see, we're directly opposite the quarries where the brown stone is taken out in summer? The place is shut up now, but under a shed a lot of material is lying. I can remember seeing a strong wire cable there that was used for something. Lef knew about it too, and I suppose the idea flashed into his scheming brain to use it in upsetting your boat."

"He did it, all right; broke my mast off, seems like, or wrecked it anyway. I'd just like to hammer him for this. Why, what if the thing had smashed

down on our heads, it might have cracked our cocos!" exclaimed the other, in indignation.

"Lef seldom considers what a serious result may follow, when he sets about carrying out a joke. Remember the time he cut the electric light wires when we were having that entertainment in the big school hall, leaving the audience in the dark? Came near having a panic then that might have been terrible. Well, what are we going to do about it, Lanky?"

"Let's take a look at the mast. If it can be put up temporarily perhaps we can wiggle home yet with decency. Otherwise I guess it's a case of push with us," and the angry skipper of the wrecked craft hurried back to take a reckoning.

"Give us a hand here, Frank; I'm going to try to see if it can be stuck in once more, strong enough to hold out. There she goes up! Now, a little this way, and hold steady while I chuck in a few wedges to grip her."

"She seems to stand pretty good," remarked Frank, presently.

"Sure as you're born; and we're going to get home under our own steam, as we'd say if we had a boat that ran that way. Well, we're some lucky, after all. The fellow who never has an accident deserves little credit; but those who meet with all sorts of trouble, and conquer, ought to get special

mention. And we belong to that class to-night, with our two collisions," and Lanky patted himself on the chest in appreciation.

"Hear! hear! Never were truer words spoken in jest. And if this sort of luck only follows us all through our career when we get out in the big world, there's nothing on earth going to keep us from bringing the bacon home," Frank observed.

"All aboard again then, passengers for Columbia! I'm getting ravenously hungry, and my folks will be sending to the police to look for me under the ice if I don't show up soon. Ready, Frank? Then off we go!"

"Better luck this time. Be ready for anything unexpected; for when that Lef Seller starts in to doing stunts he never knows when to stop. I'm going to watch overhead, and you keep close tabs on the ice, Lanky."

But they met with no new adventure, and after a little the ice-boat was brought safely into the cove where Lanky had a house in which he could place his novel craft, after unstepping the mast.

"I'll get at it in the morning, and repair damages," he remarked, as he locked the door after stowing things away.

"It's been a pretty lively afternoon, all told," remarked Frank.

"I should say so, what with that race, the delib-

erate attempt to bust my boat into flinders, the acceptance of the challenge, and our meeting with that upset on the way home. Then there's that plagued mystery hanging over Bill. Wish I could only say it right out, Bill, who? I guess I'm a punk hand to solve riddles, when I can't even remember a name."

"Perhaps you'll have it revealed to you in a dream to-night," suggested Frank, humorously, and digging his companion in the ribs.

"Well, stranger things have happened. I'll be thinking of it when I drop on my downy couch, all right," grumbled the other, who took the matter seriously.

"Why, a fellow would think the fate of nations depended on your remembering just where you happened to meet that tramp before. It's funny how you carry on, Lanky, old boy. Tell me when you suddenly see a great light, won't you?"

"Sure," avowed Lanky immediately, "if it happens in the night I'll ring you up on the 'phone and jut whisper 'Bill—but Bill who?' Was sure I had it then, but it slipped a cog again on me. I suppose you'll call up the committee after supper, and arrange a meeting to hand over the acceptance to our challenge?"

"That's the programme. The boys will be pleased too, for they seem to have gotten an idea in their

heads that we've actually a chance to beat Clifford at their own game," answered his chum.

"Well, what's the matter, don't you think we can do them up?" demanded Lanky.

"I hope so. Anyhow, we're just going to give them the best that's in us," was the guarded reply.

Lanky was the impetuous one, and always filled with a positive belief in his own powers to win out. Frank often had to curb this spirit, which might have led to disastrous results if allowed full rein. In his opinion it was far better to never underrate the foe, while at the same time ready to exert every atom of ability in order to accomplish a victory.

They separated soon after, each going to his own home. Frank found that his folks were already at the table, and after hurriedly brushing up he took his place.

His sister Helen seemed to know where he had gone, for one of the first things she did was to ask about the success of his mission.

"I brought back the acceptance to our challenge. It's all right," said Frank, who wondered why Helen was looking at him so strangely.

"I saw you go off with Lanky on his new ice-boat; did it work all right?" she inquired.

"Fine. We had a race going up, and won, hands down," replied her brother.

"Which means that you met Lef Seller with his *Flier*. And if you beat him I guess he didn't take it in any sportsmanlike way?" she continued, at which Frank laughed.

"You ought to be a lawyer, Helen; you persist in cornering a witness. Well, then he didn't. In fact he brought about a collision, throwing his boat squarely across our bows, in the hope that Lanky's craft would be smashed," he said.

Mr. Allen frowned.

"That boy is the pest of the town. There will never be any peace here until his father sends him away to some military school, where he can be taken in hand by a stern martinet, and made to mind. It's the only hope for him. And did he succeed in his miserable aim, my boy?" he asked, solicitously.

"There was a wreck, all right, but it happened the shoe was on the other foot, and the poor old *Flier* is only fit for the woodpile now. It's just as well, for Lef would never use her again, after being overtaken so handsomely by Lanky's new racer. But we hardly had a bit of trouble, and went on our way, leaving Lef and Bill Klemm breathing out all sorts of threats," chuckled Frank.

"The little scamp," said Mrs. Allen, indignantly. "Either one of you might have been seriously injured. Husband, I insist that you see his father,

and enter complaint against him. This has gone far enough, and should be stopped!"

Frank looked quickly toward his father.

"I hope you won't think it necessary, because among boys, you know, it is considered a point of honor to take care of their own battles. I'm going to settle with Lef soon for all I owe him," he said, gravely.

"And did you get that hurt on your left hand when the upset occurred?" continued Helen, showing that she had been observing what he had sought to conceal.

Frank turned a little red, and looked confused.

"I see that I might as well confess the whole thing, for there'll be no rest from her questions. No, that cut came later, while we were on the way back from Clifford," he said.

"That sounds as though you had another accident. Was that terrible boy to blame for that, too?" demanded the solicitous sister.

"No doubt of it. Somebody had been so kind as to stretch a wire cable across the river. They got it in the shed at the quarry. You know the river is narrow there, and the wire came down to about eight feet or more above the ice. It wasn't there when we went up; but we ran slap against it coming down."

"Oh! how awful! And what happened, Frank?"

breathed the girl, her eyes fastened on the laughing face of her brother.

"Oh, we went over, all right. Something had to give, and it was our mast. We happened to be moving rather slowly at the time, and tacking across the river, so it fell to one side, and not on us. Of course we were tumbled off, and I cut the back of my left hand, either on some sharp ice, or a runner of the boat. After a bit we managed to get the mast stepped again in a way, and came home."

Mr. Allen shook his head seriously.

"It has got to stop, that's all there is to it. If that vicious boy keeps on he will do something terrible some day with his pranks."

Nothing more was said, and Frank hoped his father would let the matter drop. He had his own plans as to how he could settle his long overdue account with Lef Seller, and believed that the time was nearly ripe for an accounting.

Calling up some of the school athletic committee, he announced that he had brought back an acceptance to the challenge. It was quickly arranged that they come to his house and act upon it that very night. Time was valuable, since Christmas was almost upon them, and the match on the ice scheduled to take place on the second day after.

Presently, fellows began to arrive. Mrs. Allen and Helen, as was customary, prepared some cake

and lemonade for refreshments after the meeting had been dismissed.

Of course there was much satisfaction over the prompt and manly acceptance of the challenge on the part of their up-river rivals.

"A little bombastic, fellows, don't you think?" remarked Jack Comfort, who was one of the Columbia Seven, and had likewise done good work in previous athletic contests that past season.

"Why not? Clifford has a right to feel stuck-up, hasn't she, over the work of her hockey team?" asked Roderic Seymour. "For five years they have skated circles around everything along the Harrapin. That's enough to make them feel proud and invincible. So much the more glory for us if we succeed in taking them down off their high horse."

Roderic was no longer a student in Columbia High, having graduated the previous year, and gone to college. He had been made an honorary member of the athletic committee, and being home a little early for the holidays, of course was present to join in the consultation.

"We're going to do that same thing, all right," declared the confident Lanky, who had also come around to the meeting, though not himself a member of the committee like Ralph West, Bones Shadduck, and Jack Comfort. "That is, unless I get knocked

out before then, and you find it impossible to fill my place."

"What do you mean, Lanky?" demanded Jack, with a puzzled look.

"I'm nearly taking a fit over not being able to place a fellow I met to-day. I only know his name as Bill, and for the life of me I can't make up my mind just where I met him. Say, some of you just rattle off all the Bills you can think of. A word dropped might give me a clue, you know, and save me staying awake to-night."

"Well, we've got a whole raft of bills over at our house that you're welcome to, if they'd be any use to you," laughed Bones Shaddock.

The others began to mention a host of names, most of them boys of the town, with an occasional business man thrown in; but Lanky listening, shook his head sadly in the negative, as he remarked:

"No use, fellows; you can't help me out of the hole. I've just got to crack that old nut myself; and sooner or later I'll do it. Hello! there's a late comer, just in time to partake of the dregs of the lemonade, and eat the last bite of cake."

Frank went out of the room, and presently came back holding a letter.

"Here, Mr. Garrison, is a communication addressed to you. It was brought here because they evidently knew our committee was in session.

Sometimes people listen over the 'phone, and hear a good many things. As the president of the committee it is up to you to read it first, and then let us hear."

The old graduate, who still loved Columbia, and served in many capacities, glanced over the communication, and then laughed out loud.

"Why," he said, "what do you think, boys? It's a challenge to our hockey team to play a game tomorrow morning!"

CHAPTER V

LANKY'S HARD LUCK

"IT NEVER rains but it pours!" cried Jack Comfort.

"Nothing but hockey in the air at present. Who's it from, Mr. Garrison?"

"That's easy to guess. I hear the Bellport fellows have been practicing some lately. They feel sore over the easy win by Clifford last year."

"Wrong in your guess, Bones. This is from the Castoff League!"

"What's that?" cried several in chorus, while looks were exchanged.

"The challenge is signed by seven names, and these constitute what they choose to call the Wanderer Hockey Team," continued the president.

Frank suddenly laughed as though he saw light.

"I don't know, Mr. President, but I've got a hunch that I could mention a few of the names on that paper," he remarked.

"Well, suppose you try, just to see," replied the other.

"How would Lef Seller, Bill Klemm, Tony Gilpin, Asa Barnes, and Watkins Kline answer?" queried Frank, promptly, while the others gasped.

"First rate, as far as you've gone. Well, Lef is the president of the Castoff League. He dares us to have a try with his team to-morrow, Saturday, morning, and promises to make it interesting for us if we accept," said Mr. Garrison.

He looked around at the faces of the gathered committee.

"It's up with you, gentlemen, to either accept or decline this challenge. If you asked my advice I'd suggest that you have nothing to do with the crowd Lef Seller has tagging after him. I've watched that boy a long time now, and never yet heard anything good of him."

"But they'd have the laugh on us if we declined," remarked Jack, shaking his head.

"And it would look as if we were afraid of the wonderful Wanderers," said Ralph West, one of Frank's most intimate chums, and a chap in whom young Allen had the deepest interest on account of certain strange occurrences connected with his life.

"Settle it in your own way; it's up to you," said the gentleman who presided, as he shrugged his shoulders. "I admit that I can't see things in quite

the same light as you boys can. What do the rest of you say?"

"I say, yes!" cried Lanky, of course, for nothing less could be expected from one of his impulsive nature.

"And on the whole, we might profit by some such exercise before meeting those fast fellows from Clifford. I think it might pay us to accept," remarked Frank.

At the same time he was wondering whether the crafty Lef might not have some sinister motive in thus seeking to coax the Columbia Seven into playing a match with his crowd on the eve, as it were, of their meeting with Clifford.

"I vote yes," remarked Paul Bird; "but I don't much fancy mixing with that bunch. They're a tough lot, and if we play them we've got to keep our eyes open constantly for trickery. I hate to say it, but I believe every fellow of the seven would injure an opposing player if he thought he could do it without being seen. Still, we can't help accepting. It would be to get the laugh; and Lef knows it, too."

"Question!" called out Bones.

A vote resulted in an almost unanimous decision to accept the challenge of the Wanderers for a game on the following morning, Saturday, at ten o'clock.

"Then we'll do the thing properly, fellows," said the president; "I'll write an acceptance, and get one of you to leave it at the Seller house on the way home."

"I'll take it," said Lanky, quickly, "as I pass near there. Consider that settled."

The balance of the evening passed pleasantly, and as usual, before they finally separated, a number of the school songs were sung, Helen having been impressed to do the honors at the piano.

To those who had once been students of old Columbia these familiar airs were filled with joy. Even Roderic, who had been away at college only half a term, was once more a Columbia High boy, and joined his voice with the others in the songs that were so dear to all the hearts of her sons and daughters.

"Don't forget to deliver that note, Lanky," called Frank, as the group went out, laughing and chattering.

"Sure I won't. I'll put it under the door if everything is dark over there; so Lef can have it early in the morning. The nerve of that fellow thinking to down Columbia with his old castoffs that were not good enough for us."

"Hold on," remarked Paul Bird, "you want to be careful how you believe that. If you look back perhaps you'll find that the real reason why none of that

crowd has been on our teams has been because of their character, not on account of their lack of stamina. Why, Lef always used to be a wonder in athletics several years ago; and Bill Klemm is able to hold his end up with nearly any one."

"Paul is right," remarked Roderic Seymour, quickly; "and it may be that these fellows will put up a stiff game to-morrow. They've got nothing to lose and everything to win. Don't underestimate them, or you boys may have a sudden cruel awakening. I've seen it happen so, more than once."

"Oh! I understand, and when the times comes you won't find me flunking, or being too certain. But that fellow does bother me. He's sure a bundle of nerves. After what he did to-night, to think of him coolly getting up this dodge," went on Lanky.

"What did he do to-night?" asked Ralph; for it had been decided between the two ice-boat voyagers that for the present they would say nothing about the strange succession of "accidents" that had befallen them, going to and from Clifford.

"Some other day I'll tell, when I have more time. Ask Frank about it. Good-night, fellows, I'm off this road," and Lanky switched away from the group.

"Don't forget that note!" called Jack Comfort.

Lanky did not answer him. Truth to tell he had come to a sudden stand there on the street, and was

staring at a figure which, passing the corner where the colored light from an apothecary shop drifted across the pavement, had turned a face toward him for a brief moment.

"Bill!"

Lanky muttered the word to himself, after the manner of one who fancied that he had seen a ghost. He even rubbed his eyes and winked, in the belief that he was seeing things that did not exist. For since he had left that forlorn figure up in camp at Rattail Island, it hardly seemed possible that he could run across him here, only a few hours later, in Columbia!

The shuffling figure turned the corner and was gone. Lanky took a step forward as if tempted to follow after; then came to a halt.

"Rats! Why should I think of chasing after that poor chap? It was him as sure as guns; but what of that? Rattail is only two miles up by the road. A hobo thinks nothing of tramping ten or twenty in a day. What's he want down here to-night? Well, if he's like the rest of the breed I reckon its liquor that draws him. Bill—Bill what? There he was, right before me again, and I ain't an inch closer to solving that terrible puzzle than before. Bill—Billy Smith, Brown, Jones; say, this is just awful how it gets away from a fellow."

So shaking his head Lanky walked on. He could

not help from turning a few times to ascertain whether the tramp was still in sight.

"He's gone, all right, and I reckon cut a bee line for the nearest saloon. And yet, come to think of it, he didn't exactly look like a drinker. There was something queer about that fellow, something a little mournful, too. Frank noticed it, though he didn't remember ever seeing him before. Wish I hadn't, for it bothers me like the mischief. Bill is going to haunt me until I know the rest."

Lanky walked on. After a short time he drew near the home of Lef Seller. It was a fine place, with a fence all the way around; for Mr. Seller owned the trolley line that led to Bellport, also the electric light plant, and several more things connected with the prosperity of Columbia.

"H'm! wonder if that old Brutus is tied up?" mused Lanky, as he reached the gate, and looked in! "he's almost toothless, but just as savage as ever. And I never fancied the rascal years back. Guess I'll take a peep and make sure."

Accordingly he walked on for a dozen yards, to where he could look back into the grounds of the Seller place.

"There's his little old dog-house under that ever-green tree. I can just see it in the moonlight, and beyond the patch of snow. What's that moving? Must be Brutus, all right, and he's chained up.

Here goes then," and returning to the gate he passed through.

About that time he heard the clank of a chain. Then Brutus lifted up his tuneful voice, and began to bark savagely. The beast used to be the terror of the community ; but age was swooping down upon him. With his teeth gone he did not create so much alarm in the hearts of passersby ; but his bark was as full of fury as in the days of his prime.

"Go it, old fellow. Don't you wish you could break loose, and get me? There's many an old score unsettled between us. My! but he's furious though! I'll stick this letter under the door, and skip out before he breaks his chain. There's nobody up in the house it seems, since everything's dark."

Lanky ran up the front steps and as speedily as possible pushed the answer to the latest challenge under the door, where it would surely be seen the first thing in the morning, when the maid opened up the vestibule.

Then turning, he started down again, meaning to hasten out of the gate; for that angry barking and snapping of the animal tearing at his chain in the rear yard did not please him at all.

He had just taken two strides away from the bottom step when he received a shock that was quite as bad as when that wire cable uptilted the ice-boat on the frozen bosom of the Harrapin.

Something moving with the speed of the wind came whirling around the side of the house. One look Lanky took, and gasped with alarm; for in the moonlight he had no difficulty in recognizing Brutus, the old dog that nursed a grudge against him!

CHAPTER VI

WHEN BRUTUS CHANGED HIS MIND

LANKY stood there as if rooted to the spot.

He saw the toothless old hound fly over to the vicinity of the gate as if expecting to find him there. Of course Brutus must immediately realize his mistake, and as age could not have dulled his sense of scent he would whirl around, to come bounding toward the steps.

Lanky's mind was busy, even if his limbs for those few seconds seemed to have become paralyzed. He could not run, for retreat was cut off; hence he must either stand and defend himself as best he might, or else hastily draw himself up into the low branches of the tree under which he happened to be standing at the moment.

Just then he took it for granted that the chain holding the dog had broken under his frantic efforts. Later on he would find occasion to change his mind somewhat on this score.

By the merest chance in the world he happened to have in his hands a fragment of a canoe mast.

Frank had given it to him, suggesting that it might be used to "step" in his boat, and the regular mast, shortened by the accident, be spliced to it, so as to realize the proper height.

It was one of those lucky streaks by which Lanky's misfortunes were usually tempered, even as the wind is to the shorn lamb. He only remembered that he was clutching this three-foot stout stick when he saw the hound jumping straight toward him.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to strike, and strike with all the power in his good arms. Lanky was a noted wielder of the willow in the baseball season, and knew just how to gauge a ball that was speeding toward him from the pitcher's box.

"Hey, there, get out, Brutus!" he shouted, on the spur of the moment.

Did Brutus obey? Not so it could be noticed. Indeed, truth to tell, the fierce old dog seemed to increase his speed, as though he had suddenly become aware of the fact that the intruder on the Seller grounds at this late hour of the night was an old foe, between whom and himself a vendetta had long existed.

"Gee! he's going to tackle me!" exclaimed Lanky, thrilled with the anticipation of meeting the animal on such apparently unequal terms.

It was perhaps mechanically that he drew back with that stout three-foot pole, as he always did when at the plate, with two strikes called upon him. But the object speeding toward him now was something far different from a horsehide sphere impelled by the arm of an artful pitcher.

Brutus was not barking or growling now. Like most of his breed when he had business in view he saved his breath. But his appearance was doubly disquieting to the boy, on that account.

Lanky made no attempt to fly. He knew the folly of it, and seemed to realize that whatever was to be done must spring from his own efforts. Hence the frantic grip he maintained upon that remnant of a once proud canoe mast; and his method of standing there clear of the trunk of the tree, so that he might at least have a free swing.

Once Brutus started from the gate, it took him only a dozen quick leaps to arrive on the scene. Lanky judged of his coming just as he had taught himself to do in connection with a ball. And when he smote with all his might and main, fair and true, he brought his strange bat against the head of the leaping hound.

Whack!

Brutus went whirling over in a confused heap of legs and head; and a mournful howl accompanied the near tragedy. But he scrambled up in a trice, and

once more assayed to bring the game down. Evidently the old fire raged in his veins, even though his toothless jaws might refuse to do their part.

Lanky had no desire to let the beast fasten upon him, teeth or no teeth. He had a hearty dislike for most dogs, and in this respect differed greatly from his chum, Frank, who was unusually fond of them.

Whang!

"Why, this is easy, dead easy!" exclaimed the boy, exultantly, as he saw his canine antagonist roll over again, and then gaining his feet go galloping around the yard, yelping furiously.

"Now for the gate; while he's fuddled!" said Lanky, starting forward.

He had gone half way when he saw the dog again bearing down on him. Some one was urging the poor beast on with eager hisses, some one who must have come from behind the house!

It was Lef Seller, fully dressed! Evidently he had been waiting to see who would carry an answer to his challenge to the house; and recognizing Lanky, in the meanness of his soul he had waited until sure that the letter must have been deposited under the door, when he had suddenly allowed Brutus his freedom!

Lanky's blood boiled with anger. Three times within the last few hours had he been brought face

to face with sudden peril, and all through the petty hatred of this contemptible schemer.

He was half tempted to rush at the fellow, and tackle him then and there, regardless of the presence of Brutus, and the fact that Lef was in his own dooryard, where he was supposed by law to have unusual rights.

Discretion carried the day, and Lanky beat a hasty retreat, threatening the dog with his cudgel as he went. Brutus had by this time learned a little wisdom. He did not fancy the result when that mast remnant sang so lively a tune on his cranium. Hence, whenever Lanky made as if about to belabor him again, he would turn tail and retreat a few yards.

In this fashion Lanky gained the gate, and placed it between himself and trouble.

Then he stood there in defiance.

"Just step outside, Lef Seller, if you want what is coming to you!" he gritted, unmindful of the fact that windows had been thrown up all around, and people were of course listening to what was said.

"Why, that you, Wallace? I declare if I didn't think it was that old hobo from up at Rattail Island. I saw him downtown, and warned Chief Hogg against him. Just like Bill to drop in and try to rob some one to-night. What under the sun were you

doing in our yard? I saw you taking a peep, and thought sure it must be a thief."

Lanky gasped for breath at this brazen declaration from Lef. He felt in his inmost soul that the other had known all along who entered the place. And yet, with his customary cleverness Lef covered his tracks.

"You know just as well as I do what brought me here," he cried.

"How should I. It's been a year and more since you ever stepped into my yard. What d'ye want? Come to make a complaint because you smashed my ice-boat to smithereens on the river this afternoon, and nearly killed Bill and me? Better look up my dad in the daytime for that, and not come sneaking about at this late hour."

"Oh! shucks, there's no getting around you. Under your front door lies the acceptance to the challenge you sent the Columbia High Hockey Team. I was commissioned to bring it around, and leave it, if you'd all gone to bed. You let that dog loose on purpose, say what you please. But I guess I oughtn't to complain, since he gave me a little batting practice, poor old Brutus!"

"Aw! you think you're smart because you hammered a poor old dog that hasn't one tooth in his head! I'd go chase myself before I boasted of such a thing," said the other, feeling especially bitter

because Lanky had again come out of a hole without much damage.

"Well, I wasn't going to let him mouth me. He always did have it in for me; and you knew that when you unchained him. All right. Keep going just as you are, and I warn you the time is close at hand when you're going to get yours, good and plenty. If Frank Allen don't give it to you, I will. I was a fool to bring that note here. I ought to have known you'd be ready to spring some dirty trick on me in return for my kindness."

So speaking Lanky whirled on his heel and stalked down the street, followed by the taunting laughter of the other. But Lanky would not condescend to make out that he heard, for he was boiling over with indignation. Besides, the excitement of the encounter with old Brutus had left him trembling somewhat, as was natural.

"Anyhow, I bet that poor old beast has a swelled head to-morrow. Wow! but didn't this bully little club just ring every time she came thump against his cranium? Wonder what Frank will say when I tell him? Two to one he'll agree with me that it was a set-up job of Lef's to give me fits. H'm! well, I oughtn't to complain, since I get out of the squabble without a scratch."

He laughed nervously and handled the stub of the canoe mast with an almost affectionate touch.

"Say, I'll never look at this fine bit of stick again without a grin. Why, I'll be sure to hear the whang as it banged up against Brutus. I guess it pays to play baseball, and know how to swing a bat," he continued.

Half a block further on he discovered that someone was moving on ahead of him.

"Granny guns! if I don't believe that's my Bill—Bill, yes plain Bill! What's he want over in this section, I'd like to know? This ain't the way up-river to his camp on Rattail. Was Lef right when he said Bill was a thief, and had come down to town to nab something? I don't know; perhaps he is, for nearly all hoboes are; but somehow I didn't kind of expect that of Bill."

He walked behind the other for a short distance. Several times he felt an inclination to hasten his steps and overtake the shuffling figure ahead. Then he changed his mind.

"It might bring about new trouble, and I reckon I've just been through the mill enough for one day. What Bill's doing here is none of my business. He's gone past our house now, and is still moving on up the road. Good-bye Bill, whoever you are, I'll remember sooner or later; I'm determined to."

So Lanky turned in at his own gate. He saw the shuffling figure stop at the sound of the closing gate, and look back. Governed by an impulse he

could never explain, Lanky, standing there, waved his hand toward the figure at the end of the fence surrounding the Wallace place.

"He's answering me. That shows that he knows I recognized him. And he doesn't seem to be afraid on that account. If he was sneaking around, meaning to rob some house he'd hardly act like that. Wish I knew what Bill was after. Perhaps I might guess if I could only remember who he makes me think of. Bill A, Bill B—I'm going clean through the alphabet but I'll hit on it sooner or later. I've just got to!"

Then Lanky entered his home. If ever a fellow ought to be satisfied that his lucky star was in the ascendant he certainly should.

"Three times wasn't out, that's sure," he chuckled as he made his way upstairs to his room; "but I wish I knew just what that Lef Seller has in mind in wanting the Columbia Hockey Seven to play his old scrub team to-morrow. And there are some other things I'd like to get on to, particularly—but here, I said I wouldn't allow myself to think of that again to-night—Bill L, Bill M, oh, rats, am I to be just haunted by that measly puzzle all my life?"

Making another determined effort he put it out of his mind. Presently he tumbled into bed, and cuddled under the warm clothes; for winter had come, and outside the air was nipping.

Whether Lanky really did dream of the lonely tramp with the familiar face he never told. Just as likely as not he did, for he was a great fellow to make mountains out of mole-hills; and once his curiosity became excited he could not rest until it was appeased.

But when he jumped out of bed in the morning and stepped across to the window, his first thought was in connection with the beauty of the early dawn.

"It's going to be a cracking good day for the game with that scrub team!" he remarked, as he hurried to dress.

An hour later, after he had finished his breakfast, and was thinking of going out, the bell of the telephone rang. As Lanky chanced to be the only one about he took down the receiver.

"Hello!" he said, wondering if it could be Frank.

"Hello! I want to speak to Lanky Wallace, please," came a strange voice.

"Well, that's me, I guess. What is it?" demanded the boy.

"If you play that Lef Seller crowd to-day, look out for fouts! They've got it arranged to just knock several of your fellows out, so they can't play Clifford next week. I heard 'em talkin' just by the merest accident, and wanted to tell you."

"Say, that's mighty kind of you. I seem to recog-

nize the voice, but can't just place you. Who is it talking, please?" asked Lanky; and then he nearly fell over when the voice through the wire went on placidly:

"Who, me? Oh! I'm just Bill!"

CHAPTER VII

FORCED TO PLAY

"HOLD the wire!" exclaimed Lanky. "You've taken my breath away! Don't break off yet, please, Bill!"

"All right, if you say so. I'm on my way back to that snug little hangout up on Rattail Island; but there ain't no great hurry. I had my breakfast, thanks," came drifting over the wire.

Lanky by a great effort managed to recover his wits.

"Say, I want to thank you again for what you told me," he went on, quickly. "Some of us had an idea that way; but there wasn't any proof. Did I understand you to say you everheard Lef Seller and his crowd talking about doing us up, so we couldn't play Clifford?"

"That's about the stuff. I couldn't get all they said, but that covers the bill."

"Where was it this happened, Bill?" asked the eager boy at the other end of the wire, his eyes

sparkling with satisfaction because his suspicions were proving sound.

"Right in town here, last night," came the reply.

"Yes I saw you here and wondered what brought you down from your camp," Lanky went on, with the hope that the other might say something calculated to bring light in the darkness, and dispel the ignorance that was setting him wild.

"I had some business here," observed the other, "and a friend made me stop all night. I seen you goin' into your place, and beckoned to you to stop. I wanted to tell you about what I heard then, but you didn't hold up. So I thought I'd better call you up this here mornin' and put you wise."

"Where are you talking from?" asked Lanky; with difficulty restraining the eagerness in his voice; for he had suddenly conceived the idea that once this was known he would have little trouble in getting a clue that would open his eyes as to the identity of the hobo with the familiar face.

A laugh, short and inclined to be satirical, floated to his ears.

"Me? Oh! I reckon I found a nickel when I dug down in my jeans, and I've just squandered the same in the drug store for this public pay call. P'raps you might feel good if we ever met again, and pay me back for my extravagance," remarked the other.

"You bet I will, and with interest too! It's mighty good of you taking all this trouble for us boys. In the name of the Columbia Seven accept thanks, Bill. You must have a soft spot in your heart for boys, tramp or no tramp," Lanky could not help remarking.

"Oh! well, so-so. It ain't been so long ago since I was a boy too. There's *some* things I ain't forgot. That's all, Lanky. So-long!"

A click, and he knew that the interview was off. Lanky hung up the receiver at his end with a thoughtful look on his face. Why, instead of his having solved the mystery that overhung the identity of the fellow, things really seemed darker than ever.

"Sure he knows me, too, else why would he call me Lanky all the time? And then again he saw me going into my own gate last night! Now, how did he know this was my home? Um! blessed if I can make head or tail of it at all. Bill's going to be as great a mystery to me as the Man in the Iron Mask is in history. But I'd better be getting a move on if I want to warn the fellows before we start that game."

With that he clapped his cap on, drew an overcoat over his sweater, and skates in hand rushed from the house.

Five minutes later he burst into the corner drug store, where the public pay telephone booth was

located to which the other had had reference. Lanky was of course well known to both the druggist and his assistant, the latter of whom he found on duty at that hour in the morning.

"Hello! Socrates, coming down to the river this morning?" was his first question; for Lanky had inherited the clever diplomatic habits of his legal parent, and knew just how to gradually approach the main issue.

"I hadn't thought of it, Lanky. Why, what's going on?" demanded the young drug clerk, one of Columbia's fans on the baseball bleachers, and a fellow quite devoted to every form of outdoor healthy sport.

"We're going to have a little rub with a scrub team, so as to keep in training for the great game with Clifford's Seven after Christmas. Better come down."

"I will, if I can get away. Saturday is a busy day with us, you see. I heard that you had challenged Clifford, and got their acceptance. Wish you luck, Lanky. It's punishment to me to be kept behind this counter when you fellows are out in the open having a jolly time," and Socrates Jones sighed as he spoke.

"By the way, did a fellow just use your 'phone here, a rather tall chap, looking kind of seedy; in fact he might pass for a hobo?" and Lanky put the

question without betraying any unusual interest.

"Why, yes, now that you speak of it, there was such a fellow talking with somebody over the wire. I didn't pay much attention to him. It was none of my business so long as he stuck his little five-cent piece in the slot before he started work. I even reckoned he might be one of the telephone men that were around here last week."

"What made you think that?" asked the boy.

"Oh! perhaps it was the way he talked—just brushed in, remarked 'I want to use the telephone a minute,' and when I said 'all right' he stepped into the booth. Say, what do you know about him." and the clerk looked inquiringly at Lanky.

"Nothing," replied the other. "That's what's ailing me. He was talking with me over the wire. I met him yesterday up near Rattail Island, where he was fishing through the ice. He did me a little favor, and when he called me up here it was to add to the debt. But while there's something familiar about his looks I can't for the life of me place him. Didn't you know him, Socrates?"

The drug clerk had been born and brought up in Columbia, and was supposed to be acquainted with about every soul in town, by sight at least. He shook his head in the negative.

"Don't believe I ever saw him before, Lanky," was his disappointing reply.

"Sure now? Take another think. Suppose I told you that his name was Bill, would that help out any?" went on the anxious boy.

"I reckon I know fifty Bills, all told. Nothing doing, Lanky. But if I happen to think of any stray Bill not accounted for, why I'll promise to let you know," the accommodating drug clerk observed.

"That's what Frank said, but he didn't call me up. Well, let it go at that. Better drop around about ten, and size up our bunch. You've seen Clifford play, and your opinion about the chances we have, would be prized, Socrates."

"Thanks. That's nice of you, Lanky. I'll try and coax the governor to let me off for an hour or so," and with that Lanky left the shop.

As he drew near the river he found many boys and girls gravitating in that direction. News of the anticipated game with the Wanderers had seeped through the town in the mysterious manner that such things circulate, thanks to the telephone; and every youngster, as well as quite a few older people, made it convenient to find some excuse for being out at the hour set for the start of the hockey match.

Lanky was quickly on the ice, and skating up the river; for it had been decided that the best spot for such sport was about a quarter of a mile above the limits of the town.

Here the banks were quite far apart, and the wide stretch afforded a splendid scope for the energetic game, as well as the crowds that would likely gather to witness the play of the Columbia High Seven.

Already most of the committee had reached the spot. Some of them were busily engaged in marking off the place selected as best fitted for the game. This was a section one hundred and seventy-five feet long by sixty-five wide. The goals were set at either end, and in the middle of the line marking the termination of the field. These goal posts were some six feet apart and four feet high, being provided with the customary goal nets.

Lanky quickly skated up to where Frank was talking with several others, among them the players who expected to participate in the coming game.

Down the river he could see a squad of boys advancing, and from the fact that Lef Seller led the bunch it was easy to guess that these were to be the adversaries of the hard-working Columbia High team.

Whatever Lanky wanted to say, he thought it best to get through with before the coming of the enemy.

"Listen here, fellows," he began, drawing them closer around him.

"Hey, gather in; Lanky's got the latest news from the seat of war!"

"Here's where you get instructions on how to play championship hockey!"

"No fooling boys; this is something serious. I was called up on the 'phone a short time ago by a fellow who claimed that he heard Lef Seller and his crowd talking last night, and that there were things said that made him believe this game was arranged just to have a chance to lame a few of Columbia High's best players, and upset the big affair of next week," said Lanky, impressively.

"What's that?" demanded Jack Comfort, the cover point of the Seven.

"Just what I thought all along!" grumbled Bones Shaddock.

"Now, I had an idea that way myself. The question is, what are we going to do about it? Can we afford to play these rough Wanderers, knowing that they are only aching to crack us on the shins, or do one of a dozen things calculated to make us lame when the time for the Clifford match comes?" asked Lanky.

All of them instinctively looked to Frank. At a time like this his judgment was supreme in such matters.

"I've been thinking this over, suspecting some such dodge myself. It's a shame that we have to play such an unscrupulous crowd; but I don't see

any decent way out of it. The only thing we can do is to keep our eyes wide open, and avoid giving them the chances they want for foul play. Besides, we must insist on having fair and efficient referee, assistant referee, umpires and time-keepers appointed. Any violation of the rules will cause the man to be thrown out."

"I prophesy that this game is going to end in a blooming old row," remarked Lanky, gloomily.

"Well, it will only be the fault of the other fellows if it does. We want to play a square game; but don't mean to stand for any trickery. Understand, fellows, keep your eyes open constantly; and make sure that you avoid off-side play, as that is what opens up opportunities for foul work. Here they come now, so nothing more can be said. Watch out!" and Frank skated off to see how the workers were getting on placing the two goal nets on the goal lines.

Lef was accompanied by a dozen or more fellows, all of whom belonged to the undesirable element in Columbia High School—boys who for various reasons were denied the privileges accorded their fellow students, either in connection with the societies, or the outdoor and indoor sports pertaining to athletics.

Well had Lef, with a vein of sarcasm in his

nature, called his team the "Outcasts," for that was practically what its members were. Still, many of them were known as fast skaters and furious hockey players. If they could only be persuaded to play fair for a change, the chances of a pretty game might be good; but Frank knew Lef far too well to believe the fellow had any desire to do the right thing.

"Just as soon as the game begins to go against them they'll resort to their customary trickery. That's the time we must look out," was what he said to the referees and time-keepers, after they had been selected.

These were outsiders, in no way connected with either side, and they could be depended on to act squarely. Had it not been so, Frank would never have entered into play with that husky seven under the leadership of Lef Seller.

When the hour of ten arrived the river banks were fairly lined with spectators, for it had been requested that as few remain on the ice as possible, on account of the chances for its giving way under such an enormous weight.

The puck was faced in the middle, between the sticks of Frank Allen and Lef Seller, as the representatives of the rival teams. Back of Frank, Shad-duck, as point, awaited the opening shock; and in

his rear came Comfort as cover point, and then West, the goal. Shay as right wing, Bird left wing, and Wallace as rover completed the seven.

"Play!" shouted the referee, and immediately the puck was set in motion.

CHAPTER VIII

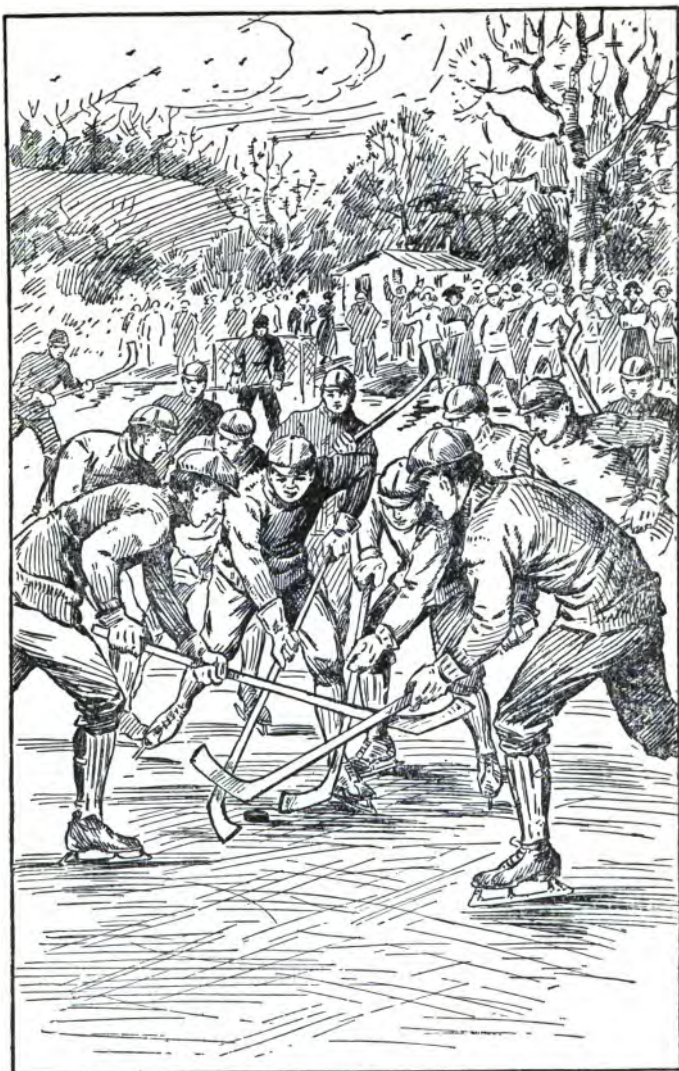
UP AGAINST THE OUTCAST SEVEN

"THEY'RE off!" shouted a dozen enthusiastic spectators, as Frank by a quick swoop of his stick managed to get the puck away from his opponent, and sent it spinning over the smooth ice in the direction of the goal of his opponents.

Instantly all was commotion. Players darted this way and that to fill their respective positions, and the clash of meeting sticks sounded furiously, as several endeavored to hook the little hard rubber disc away from the melee.

"Look at Lef play! Like old times to see that dash!" shouted one fellow.

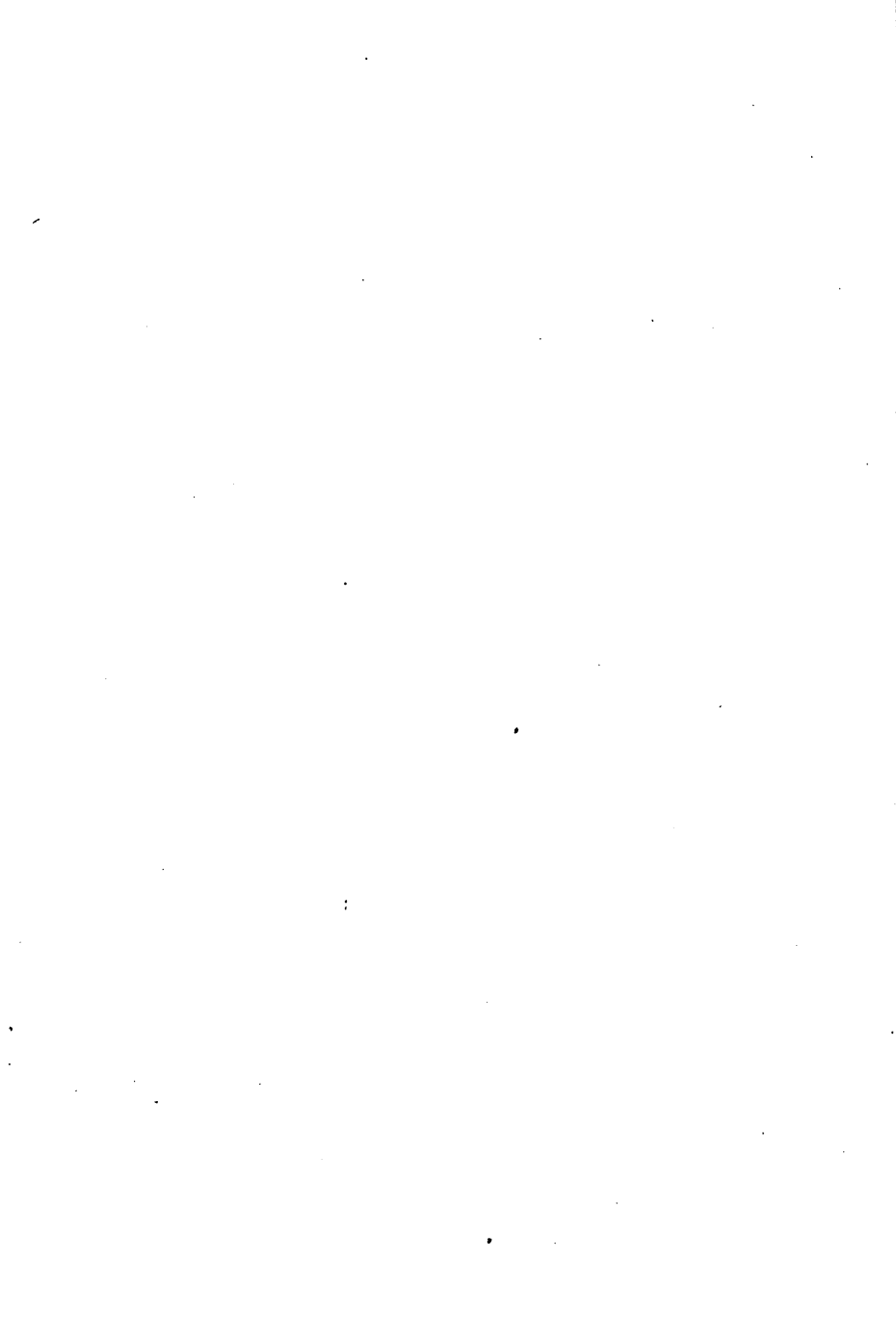
And indeed, Lef was just then showing that he knew the game from start to finish. Two years back he had been a brilliant player, and only his love for unfair methods had uncrowned him. Still, many remembered that for a time he had been without a rival on the ice; and his present work startled them.



THE CLASH OF MEETING STICKS SOUNDED FURIOUSLY.

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Boys of Columbia High on the Ice.



"Bully for the Wanderers! They're going to make you hustle some, boys! Look at that for a clean steal, would you! Wake up, there, Lanky; don't go to sleep yet! Plenty of time after you get yours!"

Of course the backers of Lef's team, while not numerous, were exceedingly noisy, and there were times when it seemed as though the Columbias might have invaded the enemy's country, such was the clamor against them.

"It's going in the net!" shrieked one looker-on, as with a tremendous blow Klemm sent the puck speeding along.

"Will it—maybe, maybe not," jeered Jack Eastwick, who as a possible substitute, was hovering near the outside of the lines.

"Hey! what you doing there, West? Leave that rubber alone, will you?" howled some one, when the defender of the Columbia goal met the flying puck with a well-aimed crack that ended the suspense temporarily, and hurled it back toward the centre of the ice.

Like spokes leading toward the hub of a wheel, flitting figures shot toward the object of interest. A stick was thrust out to intercept its progress, and again a furious fight for the possession of the coveted puck was on.

Loud rang the voices of the referee and his assist-

ant, calling upon this one and then that to mind the rules, as they were playing "off-side," and could not legally take part in the fight until relieved from the penalty.

Of course this came almost instantly, for as soon as the puck had been brought in contact with the stick of any opposing player, the penalty was off. Still, it required a quick eye and a ready voice to handle all these things.

Three times did the aggressive Wanderers have the goal of the regular team threatened. In all these instances it was only the wonderful playing of Ralph West that saved the day. He seemed to be as nimble as a gymnast, and his eye was absolutely perfect when it came to judgment.

Then the tide of battle turned. Now it was the Columbia High School team that bore down heavily on their opponents. They had waited their time, and taken stock of what Lef and his crowd had to offer. Frank had given the secret signal that meant aggressive tactics, and every player of the orange and purple girded himself for real work.

"Back up, fellows! Don't let 'em push you along!" shrieked Lef, as he saw that his followers were being finally outgeneraled by the tactics of the well-drilled Columbias, and his goal in danger.

Suddenly a wild shout went up. Columbia had scored the first goal, Lanky Wallace having sent the

puck past the guard of Kline, and landed it safely in the net.

"Face the puck again!" sang out the umpire; so it was accordingly brought once more to the centre of the field, with two of the players holding the base of their stout sticks against it, ready to let go at the word.

This time Frank allowed Lanky to stand up with Lef. He believed his chum would be able to out-point the cleverness Lef had frequently shown in getting possession of the puck in the start.

With the resumption of play there was a scramble for the rubber disc. Lanky and Lef fought tooth and nail with their sticks to scratch it out of its position between them; while the other players hovered near, ready to seize upon it like a flash, and bear it along toward goal.

Lef was terribly in earnest. His eyes looked furiously at those of his opponent, and under his breath he was undoubtedly muttering words that partook of the nature of threats. But Lanky had accomplished his part, for it allowed Shadduck to suddenly strike in, and with a blow send the puck out of its prison, and a dozen feet along the ice.

Lef immediately began to shower the Columbia point with abuse for interference, and appealed wildly to the referee, who laughingly held up his

hand to indicate that it was perfectly legal to play robber on such an occasion.

Meanwhile, none of the other players had remained to hear Lef protest. They were all too much interested in gaining control of the destinies of that sliding object, that caromed over the ice so easily. Down upon it pounced a group from either side, and there was a scrimmage that made all others up to date look weak.

Lef, finding that his protest was not going to be allowed, wasted no more time in idle talk, but sallied forth, looking for a chance to get into the fight.

Louder sounded the warnings from the two referees. The nomads were beginning to show their true nature, and seeking to gain unfair advantages. Presently the gentleman who officiated as referee called the game for a minute.

"See here, Gilpin, if you attempt foul tactics like that again I shall surely be compelled to put you out of the game!" he declared, sternly.

"What did I do?" whined Tony, trying to brazen it out.

"Ask Comfort why he's limping. You struck him without the slightest reason," returned the official, shaking his finger at the culprit, warningly.

"Well, it was an accident; he was over on my side and the rules say when a player does that he takes his own risk," said the point of the outcast club.

"You are saying what you know to be false, and I could prove it by showing the mark of your stick on his shin. That would settle which side he was on. Be careful not to repeat the offense, or out you go! Face the puck again now!"

"But the advantage was ours when you stopped play!" protested Lef, seeing a new cause for complaint.

"That matters nothing. The puck must be faced in the centre of the field at the commencement of each period, after each goal scored, and whenever there has been a halt called in the play, if the referee so decides. I put the puck back to centre as a penalty for one of your side playing foul tactics, and willfully seeking to injure one of the opposing team. Let it be a warning that such conduct cannot be tolerated."

Lef looked at the referee. Then he stared around at his players.

"He's going to quit!" shouted some one, close by.

"Same old game; if he can't have everything he wants, he won't play!"

"Poor old Lef; he's in hard luck all the time. Say, don't try the baby act, old boy! You and your crowd are putting up a good article of hockey. Keep it up, and perhaps the luck will change!"

Lef decided to stick it out. At any rate, perhaps he might find a chance to get in some crooked work

himself. Tony Gilpin was only a crude bungler at the best, and might have known he would be seen in trying to smash the Columbia cover point on the shin.

So he once again settled down, with Lanky opposing him. The Columbia player did not attempt the same style of play as before, in order to get possession of the coveted disc. Instead, he instantly began a furious attack, and taking Lef off his guard managed to steal the disputed object away despite the other's almost frantic efforts to hold on.

Again it was carried dangerously near the goal of the Wanderers, by dribbling and bold dashes. Circling hither and thither, Frank, who had taken the rubber in charge, dodged the attacks of the enemy, and when he reached the limit of his power to make good, by an adroit push he sent it past the unprepared Barnes to the charge of Bird, who made a terrific shoot for goal.

"Wow! another point for Columbia! Now, what d'ye think of that?" howled the loud-voiced enthusiast, who turned out to be the drug clerk, Socrates Jones.

Kline had been beguiled aside by a threatening shoot, and could not get back in time to cover his net, so that even as he made a desperate attempt to reach out and intercept the puck it shot past and between the goal posts. The umpire located behind

the net announced to the time-keepers that a second goal had been fairly scored for Columbia.

Lef started to protest in a loud voice. He even declared that at the time Bird shot that goal he had been playing off-side, and hence it should not count. Every one knew that this was not true, and that Lef only made the protest so as to have a shred of excuse when defeat finally came.

"He's lost his case, and now plays to get costs; or offers objections, so as to get another trial," declared Lanky, his law training causing him to see things that might escape the eyes of others.

The score was now two to nothing. Not that Lef and his followers were not putting up a good game, for they frequently caused their opponents to fight desperately in order to keep them from scoring. Lack of practice had something to do with their demoralization; that and the innate desire to play foul that seemed to be the leading characteristic of every member of the outcast team.

Among the spectators this was anticipated. Lef had never been known to do the right thing when the tide of battle went against him. Presently he would begin to show his real nature; and many of the spectators kept watching him in the expectation of witnessing his trickery if possible.

Just as the first twenty-minute period of play came to an end the puck was hustled into the net for

a third goal on the side of Frank's team. Cheers resounded from all sides. Those who favored the outcast seven scowled, or laughed as the humor seized them.

"Didn't expect anything else," remarked one fellow near Frank, as the sides rested before starting on the second half; "they done pretty good as it was. Wait and see what Lef does to 'em this time. He's got somethin' up his sleeve, you bet!"

"Course he has. Lef he's a cute one, all right," answered another of the same stripe, with a leer at Frank.

That was a nice prospect, when even the crowd expected some gross exhibition of foul play on the part of the opposing team.

"The chances are three to one the game will be called," said Frank, as he took the field with his men, the ten minute intermission having ended.

"They look ugly enough to eat us alive," remarked Ralph West, as he stopped at his position in front of the Columbia goal which he had defended so valiantly that the enemy tried in vain to enter.

This time Frank faced Lef when the puck was laid upon the ice. Eye looked into eye. That of Lef wavered a trifle, despite his bullying ways. He knew that he had done many things in the past to injure Frank Allen, and the dauntless front of the

other seemed to warn him that the day of reckoning must assuredly be near at hand.

"Play!" came the command of the referee.

This time Lef tried one of his old tricks that had served him well on many a former occasion during the time when he was undisputed champion of hockey among the boys of Columbia. But it would seem that he had lost his cunning; or else the times had sadly changed, for after a brief struggle Frank carried off the puck, and skated around the end of the opposing line like a streak of light, dribbling the rubber before him.

Hot and furious was the rush after him. Close to the danger line for the outcasts the contest moved, with sticks flying and figures darting in and out, like shuttles in the hands of expert weavers; while high above all the clamor the whistle of the referee sounded either warnings or a sudden cessation of play.

Barnes was put out of the game for foul tactics so plain that fifty people sent up a groan as he made the play. Lef showed signs of temper; but the game went on.

Five minutes later another stop came in the midst of a scrimmage. This time it was Shadduck who was hurt, and had to have his left hand bound up, as it bled freely.

"The next infraction of the rules ends the game!"

declared the referee, sternly, for he had been warned that the main object of Lef and his crowd was to cripple the Columbia players, rather than to win out.

Two goals for Columbia followed in rapid order, one going to Frank, and the other being placed to the credit of Shay.

Then in a fracas Frank was seen to suddenly topple over.

"What happened?" cried fully fifty voices, as excitement reigned.

"Lef did it—he threw back his stick over his head, and cracked Frank! It may have been an accident or not; but that ends the game all right," answered Socrates Jones.

CHAPTER IX

THE THREE CHUMS

ANGRY shouts arose all around. There were few who knew what had happened; only that Frank had been struck in some way. Lef Seller did not have many friends in Columbia High School, or the town itself, for that matter. He had made himself generally disliked; and when the word went around that it was his hockey stick that had, in a backward swing, struck Frank on the head and knocked him down, the murmurs of the crowd began to take on an ugly turn.

Of course the referee immediately ended the game. There was something else at that moment demanding attention.

"Keep back! The ice is cracking! Go back, or we'll all fall in!" shouted Lanky Wallace, waving his hands wildly, as he saw dozens start to leave the bank and hurry toward the group around the fallen lad.

His words were taken up by others.

"Keep away! It's dangerous to crowd on the ice! Frank's all right! He's getting up again! It's nothing serious, only a little accident!" they shouted, starting to hustle the squads of sightseers back.

The alarm having been given, numerous groups immediately turned back to the firm footing of the shore. Harrapin River had a swift current in places, and more than one skater had had a narrow escape from drowning in years gone by.

Frank was again on his feet, somewhat dizzy, but trying to appear just the same as before. He had received quite a hard blow on the head, as a lump proved; but could not even give a guess as to what had hit him.

Lef had not attempted to run away. He knew better. That must have proven him guilty of an intentional design to do Frank injury. He would have been mobbed before he had gone fifty feet.

So he hovered near the group, looking depressed as though he felt mortified to know it had all been his fault. Lanky, watching him closely, had difficulty in persuading himself that there was a trace of genuine regret in the mind of the other. He even fancied he could see the glitter of secret pleasure in those green eyes of the fellow, and believed Lef must be laughing in his sleeve.

"I hope you don't think I did that on purpose, Allen?" Lef exclaimed, pushing himself into the

group as Ralph and Paul were examining the head of their friend to ascertain the extent of the damages.

Frank had been laughing as he assured his friends that he was all right. At the sound of the hateful voice of Lef the smile vanished from his face. Turning, he looked for almost half a minute squarely into the face of the other. Everyone held his breath, believing that the long-expected rupture between these two was about to break loose, and that in another minute they would be fighting it out then and there.

It was a mistake, for Frank deliberately turned his back upon Lef, who was standing there in an humble attitude, strangely unnatural for him. He had seen the same glitter in those half-veiled eyes that had appeared to Lanky. It told Frank that the blow had not only been intentional, but carefully planned. Still, he had not an atom of proof. Cunning Lef generally fixed it that way.

A dozen boys shouted as Frank thus showed his utter contempt for the other. As for Lef himself, he would really have preferred an open defiance to this expression of disdain.

"Oh! well, have it just as you like, Frank Allen," he muttered, with a shrug of his shoulders; "if it was one of your chums you'd be only too willing to

call it an accident, and let it go at that. But everything that Lef Sellers does is a crime!"

"That's so, Lef," remarked one of the bystanders, jeeringly; "but that's what you get for having a bad name. If that stick of yours had struck Frank on the temple instead of where it did, they'd be carrying him home now on a shutter. So you see how lucky you are, after all."

Lef turned away. The game had been a grand disappointment to him. Still, even if his side came out at the small end of the horn, they had temporarily disabled several of the regular Columbia players, and this ought to give him some little satisfaction. But the trouble was, the game with Clifford was some days off, and none of them had been so seriously injured but that they would be all right when the time came to play again.

Followed by his crowd, Lef skated away, going up the river. Those who remained with Frank were filled with indignation.

"He's getting worse every day!" grumbled Lanky; "and it's dangerous to have such a firebrand around. He ought to be cut dead by every self-respecting fellow in the whole town. Then his father would see that it was time to get him off to some place where they didn't know him, and his mean ways."

"That's what," echoed Buster Billings, "he's just

beyond all hope of reforming. Listen to those guys laughing to beat the band as they skate away! They seem to think it was funny; and I reckon they're telling Lef he ought to have aimed better."

"It was a mistake to play them at all!" declared Paul Bird, indignantly.

"Yes, I guess it was," admitted Frank, "though like the balance of you, at the time I thought we just had to accept their challenge. However, no great amount of damage has been done. A couple of bruised shins, and a sore head tally up our hurts."

"Yes, and we just knocked spots out of 'em in the game, even with all their rough-house play. The practice pays up for the few bangs we got. But notice fellows, that not one on their side went out from hurts," remarked Jack Comfort.

"If I had it to play over again I'd do different," growled Shadduck, holding up his wounded left hand.

"Well, what's the use of crying over spilt milk?" observed Ralph; "we did what we started in to do, and showed Lef's crowd up for the tricky lot they are. Now the rest of the day is before us. Let's forget our troubles, boys."

So until noon came they skated around, or gathered in groups talking over the coming game with Clifford. Those who knew more or less about the strong points of the up-river players were eager

to tell these things to their mates, so that they might profit by them.

Frank, Ralph and Lanky walked home together at noon.

"Wait for me here a minute, fellows, please," remarked Ralph, as they came to a bookstore where papers from New York were kept on sale.

He dodged inside, leaving Lanky looking at Frank with a puzzled expression on his face.

"I think he's gone to buy a daily paper that makes a specialty of all the latest shipping news. You know Ralph is intensely interested in watching for the arrival of the *Empress of Japan* at San Francisco. He believes she will be bringing some one for whose coming the poor fellow is anxiously watching—his mother!" said Frank.

"Oh! yes, you were telling me about it," murmured Lanky. "He was brought up by the Wests in the village of Scardale as their son, and only lately learned that he had been adopted, taken from the poorhouse by the couple when a baby. And about a year ago he began to receive some money on the first of every month, with a mysterious note telling him to get an education such as he yearned to receive."

Frank nodded his head.

"Ralph has taken me into his confidence almost from the beginning," he said. "I went with him

to see a man named Ben Davis who was dying. He had an idea that this man might be his father; but it turned out otherwise. Then he discovered that the lawyer in New York who sent the monthly sums was my Uncle Jim."

"Yes," said Lanky, eagerly, "I remember the time he came up here last Fall to see you. I guess it was then he admitted that he had been employed by a gentleman named Arnold Musgrove, who was traveling in Europe with his widowed sister, a Mrs. John Langworthy. And it turned out that Ralph must be the long-lost child of that same lady—that the brother had had the baby stolen for some selfish purpose. It was all just like a story."

"And Uncle Jim followed them through Europe and to India and China, for they were great travelers," said Frank, slowly. "The last we heard from him was a cablegram from Japan, saying that the lady knew all, and that he was about to sail with her for America. Now you understand just why Ralph is wild to learn if the steamer got in yesterday, when due."

"Here he comes out, and from the look on his face I guess she arrived," muttered Lanky, trying to appear as though he and Frank had been talking of matters concerning Columbia's chances in the coming hockey contest.

"It's all right. The steamer got in yesterday,

Frank," cried Ralph, his face beaming with delight.

"Of course there's no list of passengers, though?" queried the other.

"That's so; and I only have to take it for granted that they were on board. You see this was the next steamer to leave after he cabled; and I don't believe they would have waited over; at least I hope not." and Ralph's mouth twitched in a sensitive way that told how his feelings were stirred at the prospect of meeting the mother whom he had really never known.

"It's all right, Ralph," Frank said, quickly. "Keep up heart a few more days, and then the bully times will come for you. I want you to come over and eat supper with us to-night; and it's understood, you know, that on Christmas you help to get away with the turkey and plum pudding at the Allen ranch."

"It's awfully good of you, Frank, thinking of me in that way. I don't know how I'd ever have stood it out only for you. Why, you've been like a brother to me, and your home is the dearest place I know. Yes, I'll be around some time in the afternoon," he said, squeezing the hand that was nearest him.

"And you drop in some time this evening, Lanky. There are some things I don't quite understand that I'd like explained," continued Frank.

"There's just one think I'd give a fit to understand, and nobody seems able to help me a little bit. Who is Bill? Just keep on thinking, Frank, and tell me if you remember seeing him before," and Lanky turned off to head for his own home.

CHAPTER X

LANKY BRINGS NEWS

AT ABOUT two o'clock Frank wandered down to the river again. It seemed to have an irresistible attraction for the boys of Columbia these bright wintry days, and the ice was dotted with numerous skaters, enjoying a spin.

Merry cries could be heard, as both boys and girls glided hither and thither. Some were attempting fancy skating, others indulging in a romping game of tag; while still more simply moved about in constant enjoyment of the occasion; for it was delightful just to be alive on so glorious a day, and feel the exhilaration of moving swiftly over the polished surface of the Harrapin.

But Frank, though carrying his skates, did not care much about going on. His head rang a little as an after effect of the ugly blow he had received. For some time it would have a tender sensation at that particular spot where a lump arose, calculated to bewilder any professor who prided himself on his

ability to tell the strong and weak points in a boy's character, from the bumps on his head.

Frank turned aside after looking out on the ice, and walking some little distance up the shore, came to a cove where, just as he anticipated, he found Lanky busily engaged in making the needed repairs to his ice-boat.

"Hello! Frank, I was wondering whether you mightn't drift along," remarked the worker, as he looked up to greet his chum.

"How's that stump of a mast going to serve?" asked Frank.

"Prime. Just the thing to a dot. To tell the truth I was a little suspicious of the way my mast was stepped. Now it's firmer than ever," came the reply.

"That's the way things go, sometimes; they say there isn't a single evil that happens to us but what we can get good out of it, Lanky."

"Hey! what's that you're giving me? How about that crack you got this morning? I'd like to know where you're going to get any profit out of that," and Lanky shook his head vigorously to emphasize his dissent.

"Oh! well, in the first place I learned my lesson for keeps. It's been a long time coming, but after this I'm never going to trust that sneak behind me."

"Hear! hear! I thought you'd have to come to

my way of thinking at last. You've always said there might be a streak of good in Lef. Now you know he's rotten to the core. If you've arrived at that conclusion, perhaps that thump wasn't wholly wasted after all, by jinks!" declared the ice-boat skipper, gleefully.

"Going to take a spin when you're done pottering?" asked Frank.

"Why, yes, I thought of taking a little run, down the river this time, perhaps as far as Bellport. The wind is just too good to be lost. If it dies out and leaves me stranded why, this time I can get back on the trolley. Don't suppose you feel like going with me, after getting a headache from that hit this morning?"

"I might be tempted. Somehow skating doesn't seem to appeal to me just now. Yes, I'll go you, Lanky, if you promise not to take any chances, or try to beat a mile a minute gait," laughed the other.

"Done. And five minutes more will see me through here. Glad you dropped in on me. I never like to go anywhere alone; and yet I can amuse myself at home by the hour without company."

"How is it you don't want to go up the river this time?" asked Frank, looking at his chum meaningly.

"I see you're on, all right, Frank. The truth of the matter is I'm just getting my dander up about that puzzle. I might find out the truth by going to

see Bill, and asking him plainly what his last name is, and how he comes to know me; but I just won't do it."

"The fact is, you're stubborn by nature, and the more this thing bothers you the stronger your determination to think it out for yourself; is that it, Lanky?"

"Sure thing. And just you wait and see if I don't do it too. Now we're ready to get moving. Help me push out, and we'll be off on the jump," and Lanky took hold of his novel craft with a will.

Frank fastened his skates to the framework, so they could not come loose and be lost. They were regulation hockey skates, with a blunt end that was calculated not to seriously injure any player with whose shins they might come in contact. Three of those fellows who backed Lef Seller in his game had worn skates that would never have been allowed in a regular match, as their sharp points were a constant menace to all others who came near the rapidly revolving skaters.

"Wow! ain't this just immense?" cried Lanky, as they rapidly passed under the railroad bridge and shot away like a streak down the stream, leaving the last of the shouting skaters far in the lurch.

"It certainly feels fine," admitted his comrade, crouching there on the framework that constituted the hull of the novel craft.

The wind sent them on at a tremendous pace.

"There's the big island ahead. Why, we've come four miles already! This beats any traveling I ever did," declared the delighted Frank.

"Might as well go all the way to Bellport, eh?" asked Lanky.

"Just as you say. The breeze seems to hold out all right, and is fair to take us back again, being in the west. Hit her up, my boy. Nothing in the way ahead. We'll be apt to surprise the Bellport slow wagons when we arrive in style."

Frank had apparently forgotten all his troubles of the morning. Even the pain in his head was for the time being ignored, such was the exhilaration of that rapid flight along the frozen river.

Bellport was speedily reached, and here another lot of skaters crowded around to examine the boat, and offer comments, wholly favorable.

"I just guess there'll be a dozen of the craft on the move hereabouts soon," remarked Lanky, as they once more started back home.

"You certainly stirred up a lot of breeze. I heard three fellows declare they'd have a skooter like this inside of a week," laughed Frank.

"The more the merrier. Perhaps some fellow would like to race with my *Humming Bird* then. I wish we had a broad lake for the sport. A winding river is poor for ice-boats, since the wind is apt to

head a fellow off so easy. There, it's trying to shift into the northwest now. I'll have to try tack-
ing a bit till we reach around that next bend."

But while it took very much longer to get back than it had done going, they finally reached their starting place.

"Just been gone an hour," remarked Frank, looking at his watch.

"And part of that was taken up jawing those jays at Bellport. Sixteen miles in all. I don't think we were more than eight minutes going down," declared the owner of the marvel, exultantly.

"Well, I think I've had enough for to-day; and as I don't hanker after skating just now I'll meander home. Ralph will be around soon anyhow; and Lanky, you're going to drop in after supper, you promised."

"If I get back safe and sound from my second trip down the river. There's Paul Bird, and I promised to give him a spin. So-long, Frank. Keep on using that lotion on that bump, and I reckon it won't hurt much by Monday," and Lanky began to make motions with his extended arms in the endeavor to attract the attention of the other chum who had just arrived on the river bank with his skates.

An hour later, Frank, at home, saw Ralph coming up the walk.

"I wondered if you got back," said the other, on entering; "for I saw you flying down the river with Lanky on that wonderful affair he calls an ice-boat. Phew! but you were hustling along to beat the band."

"You saw us, then? Where were you, for I'm sure neither of us set eyes on you?" asked Frank, as they entered the house.

"Oh! I had an errand down below the town, and happened to be walking along the road when I heard the sound of cutting steel, and looked out just in time to see you whizz by. I reckon you went all of a mile a minute. It nearly made me dizzy to watch you whirl down the river. I don't believe I'd like that sort of thing overly much," confessed Ralph.

Supper over, the boys were seated in the library, Mr. Allen being out of town for a short time.

"Lanky promised to drop in, and it's about time for him to show up. I didn't tell him this afternoon, but I've got several suggestions to make in connection with our play for Wednesday that I'd like to get his opinion on. There, that must be his ring now," declared Frank.

It proved to be so, for Lanky immediately burst into the room. One look at his excited face told Frank that something had occurred to stir his friend up.

"You're bringing news of some sort, old fellow,

I can see," he remarked, immediately. "What's happened now? Have another adventure this afternoon with Paul? They're getting to be the regular diet in your case, apparently. Come, out with it; what's happened?"

Lanky shook his head, even as he dropped into a chair, panting.

"No, it ain't that, Frank. Run all the way here from headquarters to tell you the news. Gee! it galls me to think that I've made such a fool of myself!" he gasped.

"About what? Relieve our suspense, please. You get us worked up to top-notch eagerness, and then you hold off. Explain a little," cried Ralph.

"I was on an errand. Dad sent me to see Chief Hogg about something. You know we had a robbery at our place not long ago, and since then dad, being a councilman, has had a lot to do with the police. He really acts as mayor of the town, being president of the council," went on Lanky.

"All right. We understand that. Now, you went to police headquarters. What's that got to do with your looking so disgusted? Did that fellow who robbed your father escape, after all?" asked Frank.

"No. But the chief had just got word that another notorious rascal had broken out of jail, and it was believed that he was last seen heading for this

part of the country," remarked Lanky, shaking his head dolefully.

"Well, what's that got to do with you or me?" demanded Frank.

"Why, hang the luck, you don't just understand. Perhaps you'll see better when I tell you that the name of this escaped rogue is Brockholt—plain Bill Brockholt!"

CHAPTER XI

STILL A MYSTERY

"OH! I see!" exclaimed Frank. "You naturally think that the tramp in that shack on Rattail Island is this man the police are looking for?"

"Same fellow, sure," grunted the disgusted Lanky. "And to think I've been and made myself believe I must have known him some time. Shucks! I'm just too mad to see straight, that's what."

"Hold on," remarked Frank, quietly, "let's see if we've got this straight. Somehow or other it doesn't just strike me that that chap had the look of a real bad man. He was a tramp, and looked shiftless, as all hoboes do; but I wouldn't be in too big a hurry to believe the worst about Bill."

"Why, whatever can you mean? Teaching a budding lawyer how to look before he leaps! Say, do you still believe Bill may be all right?" and Lanky jumped from his chair to seize hold of Frank's arm.

"I don't know about that, but let's investigate a

little, and see how he compares in looks. Of course you asked about that?" went on Frank.

"Of course I didn't now, smarty," came the reply, while Lanky looked chagrined. "And there it was on the wall too, right under the reward offered for recapturing this Bill Brockholt, who, it seems, is a dangerous piece of baggage. It was silly of me not to wait and read up, but I was so dead sure, and afraid Chief Hogg might ask me questions that I didn't want to answer, I just cut, and ran all the way here."

"Then you really don't know?" continued Frank.

"Say, suppose you call him up on the 'phone and make a few inquiries. The chief thinks a lot of you, Frank, and will tell you anything you want. You can say I am here and brought the news, and you'd like to hear what this chap looks like, so that if you run across him you can let the chief know. Eh, how's that?"

"Remember that Frank was instrumental in bringing about the capture of the fellow who robbed your house, Lanky, and he let the chief have pretty much all the glory, and the fat reward as well. Oh; yes Chief Hogg is mighty well satisfied to tell Frank anything and everything. It pays him handsomely to do so," laughed Ralph.

Meanwhile Frank had gone over to the desk on which the telephone stood.

Lanky was shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"You see, he was in town last night. I saw him twice, and his actions looked a bit suspicious too. He didn't seem to want anybody to notice him, for he dodged out of sight when a man came along. Now, what did he do that for, I'd just like to know? Even Lef Seller noticed him, for he said so. I don't like it at all."

Lanky did not say anything more, for Frank was speaking, and with his companion he moved closer, expecting to hear what the chief replied, for he was a loud talker over the wire, with a voice that carried like a flute.

"Hello! is this Chief Hogg?" asked Frank.

"It is. Who's that talking—that you, Frank?" for somehow the other had recognized the boy's voice.

"Yes, Frank Allen. Lanky is here, and he's just been telling us something he heard down at your place a bit ago."

"Oh! yes, you must mean about that clever rascal, Bill Brockholt, who escaped from the prison over at Lauderville, and is supposed to have headed this way. We were warned to keep a good lookout for him. He's a smart rascal, and a desperate one, too. What's in the wind, Frank; want to try your hand at rounding up another lag of this kind? You

helped us that last time immense, and we'd be glad to have you do it some more," came over the wire, accompanied with a laugh.

"Oh! no, I'm not hankering after another experience, Chief. But Lanky forgot to read the description of the escaped jailbird; and I wondered if you would please tell me what he looks like, so I might know him if I happened to run across such a fellow in my wanderings during holiday week?"

"Will I? Well, I guess, yes, and only too glad to accommodate such a fine fellow as you are. Listen now. He's short and dark-skinned; looks more like an Italian than a German. Has broad shoulders, and an eye that seems to pierce you through and through. Hair black as tar, nose a trifle hooked. Has a scar like a new moon on his right cheek. Weighs one hundred and seventy pounds. Dressed——"

"That's quite enough, Chief. Thank you for your kindness. If I meet up with Bill I think I'll be apt to know it."

Frank deliberately hung up the receiver. Then he turned and looked into the face of Lanky, who was standing there, a foolish grin marking his features.

"Get that, Lanky?" asked Frank, raising his eyebrows with the question.

"Every word. I could have heard the chief talk if I'd been in the next room."

"Well, what do you think now?" continued Frank.

"Several things. First that I'm next door to a jackass for pounding over here without making sure," replied the other, shrugging his shoulders in disgust.

"Well, we won't try to dispute the assertion of a gentleman who ought to be the best judge about his own standing. What else?" asked Frank, smiling broadly, and winking toward Ralph as he spoke.

"Second, that I'm in for another spell of thinking, for if Bill ain't Brockholt, then he must be somebody else."

"Bright idea. It would seem reasonable, anyway. And you mean that it's still up to you to lie awake nights trying to remember where you could ever have met a fellow who looks like our tramp of Rat-tail Island; is that it?" continued Frank.

"More than ever. I didn't tell you this morning who it was warned me that Lef Seller and his crowd meant to play so as to disable some of the Columbia Seven in the hockey game," Lanky remarked, seriously.

"That's a fact, you didn't. I meant to ask you later on, but it slipped my mind, so many things happened. Then that crack on the head upset me more or less. From the way you talk I imagine

you're going to unbosom yourself of that secret now. Look here, was it that Bill?" demanded Frank, suddenly jumping at conclusions.

"Just who it was," returned the other, coolly.

"Then you saw him this morning?" went on Frank.

"No I didn't. He called me up to tell me."

"What, on the 'phone? Has he got a private wire up to Rattail Island?" asked the third member of the group.

"Bosh! he was here in town. Just stepped into the drug store, told Socrates Jones he wanted to 'phone, walked into the booth, planked down his little nickel, and used the whole outfit like he was to the manner born. Think of a hobo doing that, would you?" cried Lanky, triumphantly.

"Huh! that's nothing. A lot of these tramps have been workers once. Perhaps Bill may have been a telephone wireman, or something like that, in his palmy days, when he got his food by the sweat of his brow, instead of begging it at back doors," remarked Frank, immediately.

"Say, now, that reminds me that Socrates said he acted like he knew all about a telephone—in fact, from his manner, Socrates had an idea he belonged to that crew you remember we saw around here last week fixing the wires along the road to Bellport. Perhaps that was were I met him. It might be, you

know; but it seems to be impressed on my mind that I knew the man, once on a time," continued the persistent Lanky.

"Then he told you over the wire—said that he knew Lef and his cronies were planning to do us a rough deal—was that it, Lanky?" Frank asked.

"Something like that. Said he chanced to hear 'em talking. I guess that Bill don't seem to hanker much after Lef. He soured on him after that meeting up the river, and perhaps Lef threatened to have him hauled in if he dared show up here in the town. But Bill came, anyhow, for I saw him myself."

"Well, since it was a false alarm you rang, suppose you let poor Bill rest for a while, now, and pay attention to me. I've got something I want to talk with you about, and which concerns our work at hockey," ventured Frank, anxious to divert his friend's attention from the subject which seemed to be getting such a tremendous hold upon Lanky's mind.

"Just as you say. All in good time I'll know who Bill is. I haven't lost any brother that I know of, so he couldn't step in to do me out of my rightful inheritance. So fire away, Frank. What's the dodge you've got now. Something we can run out together in the game, that will astonish those

smarties of Clifford, who imagine that they're the whole shooting-match?"

Frank laughingly disclaimed any intention of paralyzing their opponents with a brilliant play. He simply wanted to talk over certain matters connected with the line of defense that Lanky, as the rover of the seven, could bring to bear better than any one else.

It was nearly ten o'clock when the two visitors started up to leave.

"No chance of our being kidnapped to-night, I guess, Frank?" laughingly suggested Lanky.

"Hardly. Clifford is too sure of winning that match to want to weaken our poor team. They think we've only got our nerve to go on; and that they can make circles around us when it comes to a show-up. If I don't see you again, Ralph, remember you promised to spend the whole day with me Monday," said Frank.

"I'm not apt to forget. If it's half way decent we'll skate as far up the river as we can in the morning. I wish Lanky was to be along," returned the other.

"Wish so too, but they made other arrangements for me on Christmas, you see," grunted the one addressed, with a look of disgust on his face.

"We don't have dinner until evening on that day, so father can get home in time; so you see the

whole day is before us. Good-night, fellows. You might keep an eye around you on the way home. Queer things happen around here sometimes; and after the way Lef acted this morning I wouldn't put anything mean past him. If he couldn't cripple us enough in a hockey game he might take a notion to go about it some other way."

"Let him try it on, that's all," declared Lanky, gritting his teeth, and clenching his fist aggressively, as he went out of the door into the cold wintery night.

CHAPTER XII

THE HEADWATERS OF THE HARRAPIN

"READY, Frank?" asked Ralph West, as they stood on the ice Christmas morning, with a dozen other fellows enjoying the frosty air.

"Just a few seconds. That left skate is always more trouble to get fastened than the other. I suppose it's because I'm clumsy with it. There you are. Now, let's get away, Ralph. I've got a lunch in my pocket, in case we don't find a chance to pick up anything to eat on our long trip."

Frank stamped his feet several times to induce circulation. It was wonderful how the fair weather held out. The oldest inhabitant could not remember a longer stretch during any winter in the past. Day after day passed, and still the sky remained blue, and the mercury hovered far below the freezing point.

Away the two boys went. They took it easy at the start, as might be expected from so wise a fellow as Frank.

"I've always heard it said that when you have a day's journey ahead it is foolish to press a willing horse at the start. Better warm up to it slowly. So, as we are in no hurry. Ralph, suppose we just move along at this steady pace. Time enough to hit it up later," remarked the one who took the lead.

"It's a grand Christmas day," observed Ralph, drawing in a long breath, and looking at his companion with a gleam in his eye that Frank could easily understand.

"Yes, and I hope it may bring you the wish of your heart, old fellow. Perhaps before you go to bed to-night something may have come into your life that you've been hoping for a long time," he said, softly, yet nodding his head cheerfully.

"That would be the greatest thing ever. Oh! I hope that if not to-day it will come to-morrow, or the day after! I'm growing nervous waiting, Frank."

"There's the island above. Wonder if we'll find Bill still on deck?" remarked the other, wishing to change the subject; for he saw that Ralph was really showing signs of the long-continued strain.

Presently Ralph cried out:

"There's somebody fishing there at the place you said. Is that Bill?"

"It looks like him. Yes, there he's waving his hand. I guess he knows me better than I do him.

We'll stop a few minutes to chat. Lanky has got me all worked up about the fellow, too, and I'm wondering if I could ever have met him before. But I'm not going to ask him point blank. Lanky would say I was interfering in his preserves. Let him think it out if he prefers."

The lone fisherman was apparently glad to see Frank.

He seemed a little more cheerful than before. Perhaps things were looking up in hoboland. At any rate he grinned, and when Frank held out his hand he wiped his own palm on his trousers before accepting it.

"I want to thank you for doing us that little favor Saturday morning," said the boy, and the other acted as though a bit confused.

"Oh! you mean about that Lef Seller gang. That's all right. I just happened to hear 'em talkin', and thought I'd like to tell Lanky about it. You fellers acted square toward me the other day; but they talked as if they'd like to jump me if they just dared. I wish they had. I was just achin' for trouble then. Feel a little better now. They's times, you know, when you just seem like nawthin' could fix you up but a scrap; and I ain't a fighter naturally, either," went on Bill, who had resumed the tending of several fish lines he had dropped through holes chopped in the ice.

"But perhaps you know something about telephones?" suggested Frank, casually.

He was surprised to see the tramp actually turn red in the face, though just why he should was a complete mystery.

"Why, yes, I did uster to have somethin' to do with 'em long ago. What got that idee in your head, Frank?" asked the man, quickly.

"Only because the clerk in the drug store said you acted as if you belonged to the repair gang that was up here a week ago. He had an idea you might be," replied Frank.

"Socrates hit it wrong, then, Socrates did," said the other, with a half grin; and then one of his lines gave evidence of having a fish fast he started to draw it in hand over hand, until he threw upon the ice a fine plump pickerel that would weigh at least two pounds.

"If 'twas later I'd ask you boys to stop over and have a bite of camp fare with me; but p'raps you wouldn't hanker much after such grub as I could set before you. When a feller has only his appetite along he don't care much about fancy fixin's. All he wants is enough to eat and drink. I've been a tramp a long time now, and yet I'd quit to-morrow if I only could get the chanct. I'm right sick of it all."

Bill went on to relate some of his queer experiences

while on the road; and he had evidently seen a host of remarkable adventures. But not once did he refer to his past life beyond the time he joined the knights of the railroad track and the highway.

"He's either ashamed of it, or else there's something there that he finds it unpleasant to remember," was Frank's inward comment, on noticing this fact.

During the ten minutes they stood there watching him, Bill pulled in three fish, all of fair size.

"Sure you bring me good luck, Frank; wish it would carry round to some other things, I do," declared the hobo, with a significant look on his face.

"By the way," remarked Frank, as they prepared to move along, "better keep an eye out for a short, dark-faced man with a terrible eye. He answers to the name of Bill Brockholt, and has just escaped from the penitentiary over at Lauderville. Just as like as not he might wander along this way, and want to share your bunk here, as a sort of retired nest where they wouldn't be apt to look for him."

"All right; I'll keep an eye out for the chap. Never heard about him. What's he been doing to get locked up?" asked the other, and Frank could not see any indication that he cared particularly about the matter.

"Oh! he's a bad egg, and the Chief says there's a reward of three hundred dollars out for him. Worth hauling in, Bill?" suggested Frank.

"Sure, and I'll collar it if so be he comes this way. So-long, Frank. Dinner at twelve, sharp. Remember that, if you happen along. 'Taint a genuine Christmas feed, but beggars ain't got a right to be choosers. If I had my way I'd be in a different place to-day. Luck's agin me, I reckon. They've gone, and I'm out in the cold!"

With that they left him there, muttering to himself. Frank had caught those significant last sentences. He really began to feel something of the same curiosity creep over him that had captured Lanky.

"He speaks my name as if he had known me a long time. Lanky said the same; and there's Lef Seller, he seems to be on to his ways from the ground up. Besides, he mentioned the drug clerk's name. Now, you see he doesn't pay any attention to you, Ralph. That may be because you're a newcomer in Columbia; only been here a year and a half, all told. H'm! I wonder if he is somebody we once knew? Lanky declares it is so, and I'm beginning to thing so too."

But he was determined that he would not be so foolish as his friend, and allow the perplexing mystery to annoy him. So he cast it away, and started to speak of other things connected with their morning sport.

Presently they reached Clifford.

Here another batch of skaters was to be seen, more than below. Clifford, as has been said before, was given over wholly to winter sports; and every boy and girl seemed to vie in becoming an accomplished skater.

Some of them knew Frank, and called out a greeting as he came up. Perhaps they anticipated that his errand might be in connection with the challenge that he had himself carried to the high school of the upper town but a few days previous.

"Going to back down, Allen? Taking water? Hope not, for we've got it in for you Columbia boys, day after to-morrow!" one fellow cried out.

Frank only laughed, and shook his head.

"He's come up here to pick up points on our team's playing!" shouted another lad, skating up eagerly to see what was going on.

"Go chase yourself, Tommy Dodd. Frank Allen doesn't sneak around that way. He's a clean sport, Frank is, and does things on the level, if he does live in poor old Columbia," cried a third fellow, wearing the Clifford colors on his hat.

"Thanks awfully for that, Dakes. But don't go to pitying Columbia. She's got all she can stand now, taking care of the honors she's won this year. When we sweep up your clever seven in hockey it means that everything belongs to us this year. We're just on our way further up the river, and

must be off. Be good to yourselves, and bring plenty of handkerchiefs along day after to-morrow. You may need 'em."

With this sort of chaff Frank waved his hand to the group. Then he and Ralph slipped away, and in a few minutes, turning a bend, they lost sight of the Clifford crowd.

A few miles above this town the Harrapin began to get smaller. The banks came closer together, and the surrounding country became much wilder.

When noon arrived they had gone about as far as was advisable. The ice was not so good, and the stream had become a mere winding creek.

"This is about the limit; suppose we call a halt here," suggested Frank, as he sat down upon a tree that very conveniently hung very low from the bank, offering a seat.

"Where are we, do you suppose?" asked Ralph.

"I fancy about twenty miles from Columbia by water, and perhaps fourteen as the crow flies. The stream twists and turns around like a snake up here. The railroad is near by, too. We've been ascending all the time. Look there, you can just get a glimpse of a distant smoke-stack. Know what that is? The penitentiary over at Lauderville."

"That's the place the convict escaped from, isn't it?" asked Ralph, quickly.

"Yes, but we needn't think anything about that," laughed the other.

"Well, all the same, somebody's coming along like hot cakes. I can hear skates cutting the ice to beat the band. There, I had a glimpse of him through the bushes just then," went on Ralph.

"So did I," laughed Frank; "and do you know who it is? Just wait till he rounds that point below, and be ready to shout. There he comes! Now, what do you think?"

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT THE SMOKE MEANT

"LANKY!"

"Ahoy! there, you sprinters, I began to think you were headed for the Arctic regions. Let me get my breath, will you?" and the almost exhausted skater sank on the bent tree trunk, panting heavily.

"This is sure an unexpected treat, old top," said Frank, mimicking Lanky in his method of speech; "and to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

"Found that my people had changed their plans at the last minute, and meant to stay home and have Christmas dinner at night. Thought of you two ducks immediately, and what a bully good time I was missing. So I grabbed up my skates, and put for the drink at full speed. Found you were half an hour and more on the way; so I started in pursuit. I've been keeping it up all this time."

"Why, we haven't raced at all, have we, Ralph?"

Did you stop to talk with Friend Bill on the way, Lanky?" asked Frank.

"Who, me? Not so you could notice it. I told you I was going to dig out that hard nut all by myself. If Bill started to tell me his whole family history now, I'd shut up my ears and run off," declared the other.

"Honest, now, I believe he would," laughed Frank; "he's got the most stubborn nature ever. How'd you know but what we had quit the ice long ago, and gone ashore some distance down."

"By the marks of your skates," grinned Lanky.

"But then there are other fellows who might take a notion to skate up here and explore the headwaters of the noble Harrapin?" remarked Frank.

"They don't happen to strike out just as you do. Guess I've seen your private mark often enough to know it among ten thousand."

"I reckon you are not to be caught to-day, Lanky. See anything of the other Bill? Shall we call him a counterfeit because he's a bad Bill?" asked Ralph.

"No; I forgot all about him. Say, he might be somewhere around this country. It looks tough enough to give shelter to a fellow who wanted to hide. But I guess he wouldn't trouble us. We'd be poor picking for a thief; and it would give him away. What made you ask that, Ralph?" demanded the newcomer, looking curious.

"Nothing much. You see Frank was pointing out that big smoke-stack two miles or so off there, and saying that it belonged to the penitentiary over at Lauderville."

"Is that a fact? Phew! I didn't dream we had come that far. Perhaps that runaway scamp did come this way when he broke out. Looks like it would be good country for him to hide in, all right."

Lanky glanced around rather timidly as he spoke, as though he half expected to see some ferocious figure crouching in the nearby bushes, and fastening a burning gaze upon them as they lingered.

"This is as far as we ought to go," remarked Frank.

"Thanks for that thought, old fellow. I'm nearly all in, what with that long pull, and uphill all the way. Glad to rest up a bit before turning back. Wonder if we could find a farmhouse around here. I'm nearly starved after such unusual exercise, and I happen to have some money in my jeans, it being Christmas you know, when the coin circulates in most homes."

"I have a lunch in my pocket if we fail to locate any house. True, if Lanky here is real hungry, he could take it in three bites; but we'll make him put a curb on that ferocious appetite of his, for once," Frank remarked, with humor in his eye.

"But I saw a farmhouse a mile or two back. Let's

head that way and implore them to have pity on three poor young fellows lost in the wilds," suggested Ralph.

"Well, a cold bite doesn't appeal to me any more than it seems to in your case," observed Frank; "and if you're rested, Lanky, we'll pull up stakes and return over our course until we sight the friendly harbor. But make up your mind that it is the cash that will influence a farmer up here far more quickly than any hard-luck story."

"Yes, they get those every day from the army of tramps. Off we go, then, boys," cried Lanky, jumping to his feet. "Did you stop to talk with him on the way up?" he presently threw over his shoulder as he sped along down the winding stream.

"Why, yes, we stopped about ten minutes at the island. He pulled out three fine slinkers while we stood there. And he said, Lanky——"

"Here, never mind what he said. I don't want to hear it, I tell you," interrupted the other, putting his hands to his ears.

"Oh! splash! don't jump at conclusions so fast. He invited us to stop and have Christmas dinner with him at the Hotel de Hobo. Bill gave us to understand that his cut glass had not arrived, and the *chef* had struck, so that a course dinner was out of the question, but we would find heaps of fish ready."

"Huh! I told you Bill was all right, didn't I?" came over the shoulder of the one ahead.

"And he's promised to keep an eye out for that counterfeit Bill, what's his name—Brockholt. There's a cool three hundred up for his arrest and return to Lauderville. Bill, of Rattail Island, is out for the stuff," went on Frank.

"I'm right glad it's so. That proves he couldn't be mixed up with the fellow they say escaped from the pen. But there's the farmhouse through that bunch of water maples, boys. Are we going to make a try for grub?" demanded Lanky.

"Watch us, that's all. And here's as good a place to take our skates off as any. Look out for dogs, fellows. They all keep 'em up here, it's so lonely for the women folks; and I imagine that every now and then some prisoner escapes in this direction."

"My feet feel like clubs. I can hardly stand," declared Ralph.

"Jump up and down some. That'll bring about circulation of blood, and take away the numbness. Now, come along, all who want to join the grub skirmishers," with which Frank led the way up the bank.

"Just our luck to strike a house where there isn't any smoke, and the good people have gone ten miles away to eat Christmas dinner with another part of

the family," grumbled Lanky, from the rear, as he stumbled along.

"Whatever got that notion into your head?" asked Frank, turning around.

"Oh! I had it happen one time I was away. I think that was on Thanksgiving. We floundered three miles across a marsh, in mud up to our knees, and got to the house on the hill only to find it shut up and cold, with a paper on the back door telling John, whoever he might be, that they would be back to-morrow. You ought to have seen us if you ever wanted to look on a disgusted bunch."

"Go on," said Frank.

"How do you know there is anything else?" asked Lanky, grinning whimsically.

"Because I know you too well to believe it would end there. Confess now that you got something to eat after all—that you broke into that peaceful farmhouse and cooked a full dinner for the crowd."

"Oh! I see that you've heard. Well, we did that same thing, for we were nearly famished. But we cleaned everything up, washed the dishes, and when we went away left two dollars on the kitchen table with a note of apology," confessed Lanky.

"Well, that was decent of you anyhow. Catch Lef Seller and his cronies doing anything like that. They'd have smashed things generally like a lot of Apaches on the war-path. But you seem to be

afraid that we wouldn't find any smoke rising from this farmhouse over yonder. Take a peep, and tell me what you think."

Something in the voice of Frank caused the others to hurry up beside him. Here they could easily see the house, now not more than a quarter of a mile distant.

"Say," observed Lanky immediately, as a smile of appreciation covered his face, "they're busy cooking for all that's out. Must be getting up a regular old-time Christmas dinner such as you read about. Yum! yum! wasn't it an inspiration that made me suggest coming over here? A cold lunch, hey? Not any in mine, thank you, Frank."

"Hold on," returned the other, quickly; "Ralph, are your eyes any better than Lanky's. When he's real hungry everything looks like grub to him. What do you say, partner?"

"Frank, there's a fire there," cried Ralph, quickly.

"Course there is. How under the sun could they get dinner without? Think every farmhouse here is up to date with the latest fireless cooker? Come off, now!" but neither of the others saw fit to argue the question.

"The house is afire!" exclaimed Frank, decisively.

"What?" roared Lanky, suddenly waking up.

"Come along, boys! Perhaps after all our being

on the spot is going to be worth more than a mere dinner. We may be of use to save the house!" cried Frank as he darted off, with the others dangling at his heels.

"There goes our fine dinner, hang the luck!" grunted Lanky; but all the same he kept along at a rattling pace, and was just as eager to be of assistance as either of his companions; Lanky often did considerable talking, but his heart beat just as warmly as that of the next one.

"Whew! look at that, will you?" called Frank who was a few paces in advance of his companions.

The smoke was now pouring out from one end of the farmhouse in a dense cloud. Mixed with it they could catch glimpses of flames, showing that it was really a dangerous conflagration, and not merely a big smudge.

People could be seen running about, and loud cries attested to the fact that the situation was beginning to be very exciting.

"Looks like she was a goner!" gasped Lanky.

"Perhaps not. Wait till we get there, and see what's what. If there's only some water handy we may be able to do something," declared Frank.

"I see a pond close by, but of course it's frozen over. My! look at that flame licking up the wood-work!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Faster, fellows, faster! We've just got to do something for these poor people. If you're going to get any dinner here to-day, Lanky, you've sure got to pitch in and work for it. Here we are, now; get to work!" shouted Frank.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VOLUNTEER FIRE LADDIES

"WHERE's a bucket? I want a bucket! Somebody get me one quick!" shouted Lanky, as the three boys dashed up to the burning farmhouse.

"Try the barn!" answered Frank, who had found one for himself.

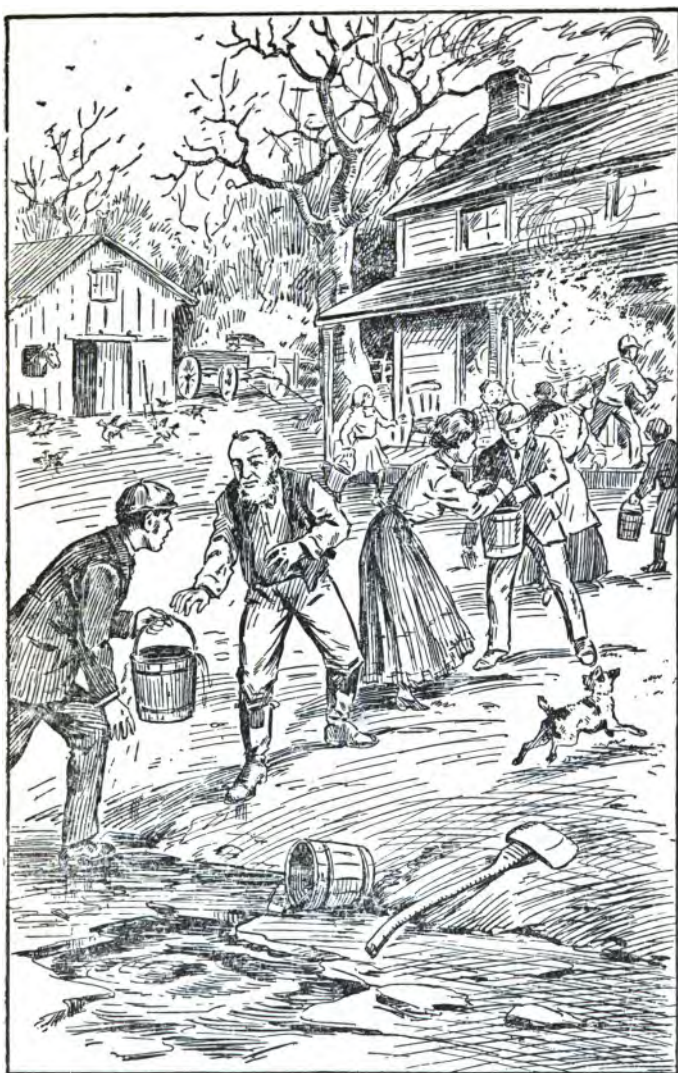
"Where'll we get water?" whooped Ralph, eager to take a hand in the game.

Frank pounced on an ax that lay on a chopping block close by.

"Follow me with that bucket, Ralph. Here, you, Mister, find anything you can that will hold water! It's the only chance!"

He ran to the pond close by, and selecting a spot where he believed the ice was thin, having been broken before for watering the stock, he set that ax to work. In a dozen seconds he had smashed a hole through the ice.

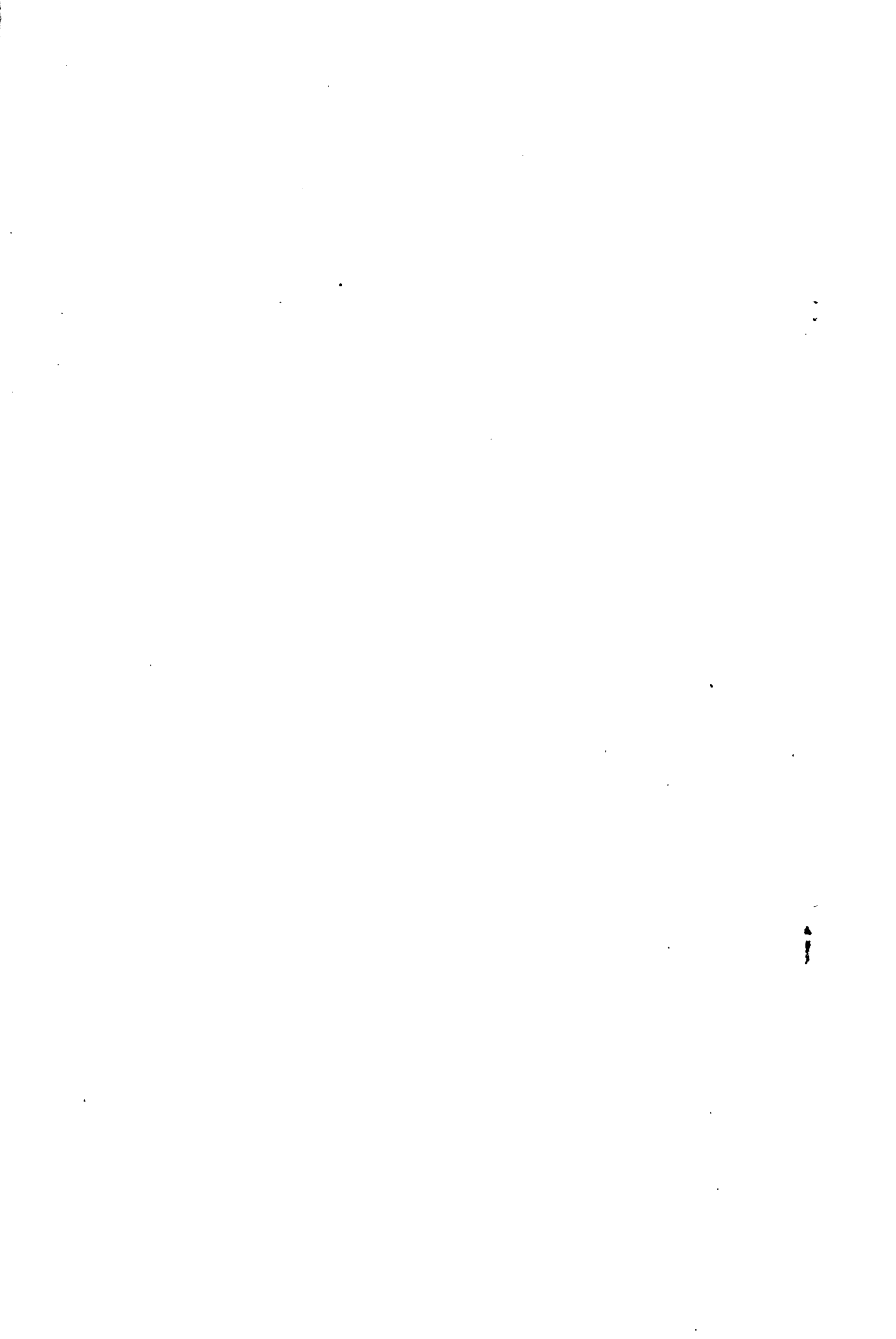
"Fill up, and get a line busy, handing the buckets along!" he exclaimed, as he dipped the one he had brought, and then started on a run for the house.



WOMEN AND GIRLS, AS WELL AS MEN, TOOK PART.

Boys of Columbia High on the Ice.

—Page 133.



Somehow the coming of these energetic boys seemed to have aroused the people of the house to the fact that only concerted action might save their home. They managed to find all manner of vessels that would hold water, and under the direction of Lanky, who took up his station half way, a regular line was formed.

Women and girls, as well as men, took part with cheerful alacrity. Hope began to take root in their hearts once more. And at the other end Ralph was dipping the various vessels in the hole to reach the water of the pond, just as fast as they came to him.

"Faster, please!" shouted Frank, who was acting the part of pipeman, and dashing the contents of the buckets on the fire.

It required good judgment to determine just where the water would do the most benefit, so that it might not be wasted. Frank had watched many a conflagration in and around Columbia during the last ten years. Perhaps he had profited by seeing how the local fire companies went to work to master the flames. The old gray-haired farmer had by this time brought several more utensils into play. He also took his place in the line and did good service in hurrying the many buckets along.

Some of the younger ones even laughed and joked, for it is hard to repress the spirits of youth. They thought it more of a picnic than a calamity.

If the fire had to come it was fortunate, Frank thought, that so many of the farmer's relatives chanced to be at the house for Christmas dinner. With only two or three to pass the buckets there would have been a poor chance to keep the blaze from eating deeper into the dry framework of the building.

"Is it gaining?" cried the old lady, who was wringing her hands near by.

"Not a bit of it, ma'am! We're whipping it down! Keep up the good work, fellows! More water! Hey! Ralph, how does the pond hold out?" shouted the energetic Lanky, as he hurried the many kinds of vessels along, there being dishpans, kettles used for preserving purposes, and even a wash-boiler, china pitchers and all sorts of galvanized and tin pails.

"Plenty where that comes from, Lanky! Hurrah for Frank! He's the boss pipeman! Look at him bursting in at the door! Good-bye old fire when that chum of ours hits at the fountain head! Here you are; pass it along lively now!"

Ralph was excited as never before. It was his first experience at a fire, and his blood fairly bounded through his veins as he dipped and dipped, regardless of the stinging coldness of the water. One eye was kept all the while on the house, and while the

smoke seemed as great as ever he really believed that the fire itself was being rapidly subdued.

The old farmer also entered the house. Possibly he was mortally concerned over the safety of certain things left in the sitting-room, where his desk was located.

Although their arms ached and they could hardly continue to hand the heavy pails along, the younger element did not cease to laugh. A couple of buxom red-cheeked girls were ring leaders in this merriment; but they did fine service in filling a gap in the line, and no one scolded because they failed to see the seriousness of the occasion.

"She's nearly all in!" called Frank, as he appeared for an instant in the open door; and then beckoning to Lanky he shouted: "I want you here, Lanky. Bring the ax along with you!"

And Lanky knew what it meant. He too had watched the firemen of Columbia doing their work during a blaze; and he had seen them cutting into the walls in order to get at the smouldering blaze that was hidden there.

"Here you are, Frank!" he cried, as he rushed into the house bearing the ax.

The smoke was blinding, and for a few seconds Lanky could not see anything even close by. He heard voices and knew that the old farmer and

Frank must be talking in the adjacent room; so he pushed on, coughing and blinking.

Although his eyes already began to sting and smart, Lanky could see the figures of the others there. The farmer in his excitement had been trying to carry out his desk, and in some way it had come apart, leaving the lower half where it had stood. Frank had just succeeded in convincing him that it was not at all necessary to try and save anything, as the fire was already well under control.

"Here's the ax, Frank," said Lanky, as he pushed in alongside them.

"Good! You receive the buckets as they come. Don't throw any more water, but keep it ready while I tear out this place here. I think all the fire that is left lies back of the wall in this wing off the main building."

Frank as he spoke swung the ax and vigorously attacked the woodwork. He had no compunction about smashing a hole right into that wall. Better a few dollars expended in making repairs than have the whole building gutted.

His suspicions were quickly verified. Hardly had the ax broken through than a tongue of flame shot through the new opening. The fire had been deluged with water in other places, and routed, but here, back of the wall, it had continued to smoulder sullenly.

After a few more hearty blows, given in order to enlarge the opening, Frank called out to his assistant.

"Now bring on your water, Lanky! Soak it in well! There, hear that fire hiss and splutter, will you. A little more juice, Mr. Volunteer. That's the ticket. I guess we've got it out, all right!" he exclaimed, wiping the perspiration from his begrimed forehead.

If the air was cold without it had been warm enough where he worked. His eyes smarted with the pungent smoke, and his throat felt as "dry as a Sahara," as Frank himself presently declared, when he took up a tin pail and swallowed some of its contents.

The fire was conquered, and the farmhouse saved! Many were the loud expressions of satisfaction from the guests. They crowded around the three boys, and insisted upon shaking hands time after time. Indeed, Lanky secretly declared that his arm ached more from this exercise than from handling water pails.

"Let's clean up the mess as best we may!" cried one of the women.

"Yes, get order out of chaos!" echoed the old farmer, whose face was now beaming with delight after his recent scare.

"Is the dinner burned up?" demanded a youngster, with tears in his eyes.

"No, that's the queer part of it," replied the good housewife; "the fire didn't get into the kitchen at all. The dinner is cooking right along, and not hurt one little bit."

Frank looked surprised.

"How is that, Mr. Baxter?" he asked. "Did you have a fire in that wing?"

"Never. We only got up here three weeks ago, after selling out below, and buying this better farm. That wing has never been used. If the fire began in there——" and he looked at Frank with this unfinished sentence on his lips, as though he hardly dared give utterance to the suspicion it aroused.

"It must have been purposely started then. You know who I am, Mr. Baxter?" Frank went on, for he had been very much surprised to see the old farmer here, when he supposed he lived close to the border of Columbia, in fact not more than a mile from his own home.

"Yes, I recognized you in the start, Frank, and it was lucky for us you came. We were all sitting here and laughing at some antics of the youngsters, while waiting to be called to dinner, when smoke came into the room. Then we started to look it up, and found the fire in full swing."

"Is there any one you know who would want to

see you burned out? Have you any enemies, Mr. Baxter?" the other went on, his curiosity aroused.

"Not that I know of. It may have been an accident. Perhaps there is a defective flue. We were having a fire in the grate for the first time in the sitting-room, you see. But all of you boys must stop a while with us, and help us eat the dinner that was saved. Ma will never hear of anything else, you may be sure," and the old man gripped Frank's hand again energetically.

"Thanks! That's nice of you, sir. We were just thinking of trying to buy a dinner when we saw the fire. You see we skated up here from Columbia," said Lanky, who was hovering near enough to catch what was said.

"You ought to know this boy, Mr. Baxter, though he's so black now his own mother might hardly recognize him. It's Lanky Wallace," observed Frank, smiling at the persistence of his hungry chum.

"Why, to be sure. I have known his father these many years, and he has been my lawyer several times. Lanky, you will be welcome a dozen times to join us. There's plenty for all, and Ma has the name of being a pretty good cook. But listen, what is it your other young friend is shouting. Let us hurry out to see."

They rushed through to the outside air. Here

Ralph was calling at the top of his voice, and pointing across the open field.

"Look yonder, fellows! What d'ye think of that? While the house burned that escaped jailbird has been here stealing all he could lay hands on," and Frank was astonished to see a man clad in a striped suit running, with bundles in his arms.

CHAPTER XV

THE OLD FARMER'S SECRET

"AN ESCAPED convict!" shouted one of the hired men.

"He's been looting the upper rooms of the house, and has carried off a lot of clothes he wants to put on to hide his striped suit!" cried the old farmer.

"And he set the house afire to cover his work!" echoed Frank, the thought coming into his mind like an inspiration.

"Chase after him, fellows!" shouted Ralph.

The excitement, which had died down after the fire was gotten under control, now sprang into new life. Everybody was jumping about, the women and girls uttering little shrieks of alarm, the men growling threats against the daring scamp who would burn a house down with as little compunction as he might light a pipe.

"Come on!" shouted Frank, as he darted off.

His two chums were close at his heels, and a

couple of men tagging along in the rear. Neither Frank nor any one of his comrades had the slightest idea as to what they would do when they came up with the desperate man. He might be armed for all they knew, and could mock their efforts to capture him.

"We're gaining on him!" gasped Ralph, when half the field had been passed over.

"Hand over fist!" echoed Lanky.

"He's handicapped by those big bundles of clothes he's carrying, that's what's the matter," Frank shot over his shoulder.

"Will we get him?" asked Ralph.

"Sure. Even if he pushes into the woods we can overhaul him. It's up to us, fellows, to get back all that plunder for the farmer. Keep right along!" encouraged Frank, who was setting them a hot pace.

Indeed, no one would ever think, to see the rapid way in which the three comrades sped along, that they had already skated more than twenty miles that day; and besides this, had worked like troopers putting out the fire which the artful thief had doubtless started.

Now and then the fugitive looked over his shoulder as he ran. He was undoubtedly trying to gauge their progress, and compare it with his own. The result must have been rather discouraging to

him. At any rate he presently allowed one of the two bundles he carried to drop to the ground.

"Whoop! he's caving! We're going to get him!" shouted Lanky.

Perhaps he wanted the other to hear what he said, so as to discourage him still more. The man ran a little better after relieving himself of a part of his load, but the boys put on an extra spurt themselves, so that his gain was only for a moment.

"Faster, fellows! Scatter out and head him off! The police will get him if he keeps on that way! Go it, you tigers! A little more ginger and he's ours!"

It was Frank now who shouted. His object was to still further alarm the rascal, and make him suspect that those who were searching for him must be close at hand.

"There! he's dropped the other bunch of plunder!" cried Ralph.

"And is running like a scared rabbit, too! See him cut it, will you? Say, Frank, I'm nearly all in, and that fellow is fresh; do we chase him till we drop?" exclaimed Lanky, who was staggering as he ran.

By this time they had arrived at the second and larger bundle of clothes.

"Hold up here; no use trying to get him," said Frank, as he stopped running.

"Like as not we'd find him a hard nut to crack," remarked Ralph, breathing with difficulty after his exertions.

"Yes, and he might do us some injury. A man is desperate when in danger of being sent back to that prison over at Lauderville. I'm just as well satisfied to let some other fellow have the pleasure of taking him in," declared Lanky, as he deliberately sat down on the bundle to get his breath.

"We've captured all the loot again, anyhow, and that's glory enough. Perhaps the good woman of the house will think we're angels in disguise roaming around the country," suggested Ralph.

"In disguise—yes, rather," grinned Lanky; "but I guess we've clinched that bully good country Christmas dinner by now, fellows. When they see us come marching home with Farmer Baxter's extra suit of duds, and all these other things Bill Brockholt tried to get away with, why ma'll just fall on our necks and hug us."

"Oh! I hope not," remarked Ralph, quickly; "but what do you suppose that fellow ever wanted with all these garments. He took enough to dress three men, I'd think."

"Huh! perhaps he meant to open a second-hand clothing store," said Lanky.

"It might be he had another fellow in mind. There may have been two escaped from the stone

jug, though the chief only mentioned Bill. Anyway, here's the stuff on our hands, and now to get it back again," remarked Frank.

Lanky shouldered the bundle.

"That's easy," he observed, as he stalked along; "one of you pick up that other pack as we come to it. Frank, you be drum major, and walk at the head of the procession. 'When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah! hurrah!' " and in this manner Lanky enlivened their return to the farmhouse.

The whole family was there awaiting them. Of course the girls commenced to clap their hands, and the others to cheer. Lanky removed his hat with a mock dignified salute, and smiling broadly said:

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. It was only a little thing after all. I guess we scared the fellow half to death. His knees began to knock together when he saw that it was Frank Allen on his track. So he threw away the valuable plunder, and hid himself in the big timber. Here is your second-best suit, Mr. Baxter, safe and sound. Anything else we can do for you, please let us know?"

Of course his merriment was contagious, and presently all were laughing at the absurdity of the thing. Still Frank saw the old farmer, whom he knew to be well-to-do in this world's goods, had a serious look on his face; and he wondered why it should be so.

The rest had gone inside, but Mr. Baxter still stood there. He seemed to be looking in the direction the fugitive had gone, and Frank, as he joined him, could see signs of new trouble in his eyes. He wondered what it meant.

"I don't think he'll come back again, sir," he remarked, "for we gave him a pretty sound scare."

"It was good of you to make him drop his bundles," remarked the other; "though if he had carried them off I don't imagine it would have mattered much to me. I reckon the poor wretch wanted to pick out some clothes to wear so he could throw away that tell-tale striped suit."

"No doubt of it, sir," replied Frank, readily; "but it was a terrible thing for him to fire the house just to cover up his robbery. Chief Hogg said he was a desperate man, and I'm ready to believe it now."

"What! did you know about him before?" asked the other, uneasily.

"Yes, it happened so. He escaped from Lauderdale prison a day or two ago, and the officers are hunting high and low for him," returned Frank.

"Er, what was his name; did you happen to hear it mentioned?" asked the farmer, his voice trembling in spite of his efforts to appear unconcerned.

"Why, yes, it was Brockholt, Bill Brockholt, sir."

"Still that might be assumed. Lots of those prisoners are never known by their real names, the warden told me," remarked the farmer, licking his dry lips.

"I suppose that is so, sir, though I never thought of it before," replied Frank.

Then the farmer turned upon the boy, as though he had nerved himself up to a certain point, and continued:

"You were pretty close up on him at the time he dropped the last bundle, I suppose, Frank?"

"Oh! yes, sir."

"And could see him plainly too?" continued Mr. Baxter, eagerly.

"Why, that was easy enough. He looked around several times, too. Yes, I would certainly know Bill Brockholt again if I ever met him."

"You see that smoke was still half blinding me. I could only make out a flying figure that seemed to be clothed in a striped suit. Could you describe him to me, Frank, after a fashion?" went on the farmer; and Frank wondered more than ever why he wished to ascertain facts that after all should interest him little, since no great damage had been done.

"Why, he had a smooth face, and his hair was cropped close to his head, to begin with. You know

they always keep the prisoners that way, for many reasons?" he started in with.

"Yes, I've seen them. I went through the place once to see—but that doesn't matter. That was two years ago. Go on, please. What about his face, Frank?"

"Why, it was a hard one as near as I could make out. The description said that he was a real desperate character, and I guess it hit him off right well. Excuse me from meeting Bill in the dark anywhere, and alone," Frank went on.

"Of course you didn't happen to be close enough to see his eyes, or whether they were blue?" asked the other, almost holding his breath.

Frank looked at him strangely.

"Why, no, but the description said they were black, and terrible eyes too."

"It did, eh? Said he had black eyes?" echoed the farmer, with a sigh of relief.

"And his hair was black too, what they had left of it. I know that this must have been the Bill Brockholt spoken of, because I could see that he was rather a squatty fellow, undersized like."

Again the farmer breathed hard, and his eyes seemed to turn upward as if a sigh of thanksgiving welled from the depths of his heart. And seeing this a sudden thought flashed into the mind of the boy.

"He suspected that he knew the fellow—that it was some former hired man who had come back to rob him; and he's glad to find out it wasn't so," was what Frank said to himself, as he followed the farmer into the house.

CHAPTER XVI

DOWN THE RIVER

"DINNER is ready, folks! Please gather around the table!" called Mrs. Baxter, as she rang a big bell vigorously.

Lanky instantly jumped from his chair as though on springs.

"That's a welcome sound, sure," he said aside to Ralph. "I reckon I'm about as hungry as a wolf."

"You mean that escaped prisoner, who must be mighty near famished. He looked like a wolf to me. Ugh! after hearing about those terrible eyes of his I just imagined I could see them, though it was too far away for that," returned his comrade, also moving to the other room.

Of course the boys had liberally splashed water, and used soap to such advantage that all the marks of the fire had been removed from their faces. They looked at the bountifully filled table with satisfaction, such as any three hungry lads might feel under similar circumstances.

The old farmer sat at the head, and there were

fully a dozen others, some of his own immediate family, and the rest relatives who had been invited to share in this first Christmas dinner in the new home.

Of course a gigantic turkey graced the board, one of the farmer's own raising. There was much merriment and laughter as the dinner proceeded. And yet Frank, as he looked now and then at the faces of both Mr. Baxter and his wife, thought he could see traces of seriousness there.

"Of course, what else could you expect?" he said to himself. "Perhaps the shock of having that fire, and the attempted robbery has upset them. People at their time of life feel such things much more than young folks."

The dinner came to an end at last, and as Lanky arose, he was shaking his head as though he had some doubts concerning his ability to continue that long trip down the Harrapin to Columbia.

"And what will the folks say when I sit down to another feed like that to-night? They'll tell me I'm the limit, sure," he remarked dolefully.

"Oh! don't worry about that, Lanky. The run back will shake things down a bit, and the chances are you'll be in pretty good trim to hit up your usual pace when seven o'clock comes around," remarked Frank, who knew the capacity of his chum in the line of a feed.

"I hope so, for it would be a shame to miss all the good things my folks expect to ring in on the bill of fare to-day," grunted the other, at which Frank laughed, and remarked to Ralph:

"I've always been told that the fish in the basket never looks so fine as the one in the water. It's so with Lanky, any way. He wants to forget the splendid dinner he's just put away, and think only of the one ahead. How is it with you, Ralph?"

"Just now I don't care whether school keeps or not. It seems to me I could never get real hungry again, and I wonder how it feels to be just wild for a bite. But I know that will wear away, as you say, Frank. When do we get busy and start for home?" came the reply.

Ralph was of course thinking of other things, wondering whether any one could have arrived at Columbia station since they left town that morning; and if he would be greeted by a mother's caresses when he reached there.

Frank knew what was passing in his mind. He did not say anything, but could sympathize with the anxious lad.

"I suppose we might as well start at once, and take things a little easy on the return trip. One thing seems to be in our favor, and that's the wind," he said after considering a moment.

"Yes, it will be at our backs much of the time," declared Ralph.

"And then again, fellows," remarked Lanky, as he joined the talk, "we'll be going down-hill all the time. That may not be noticeable, but it counts in the long run. I wonder now——"

"What's struck you, Lanky? Thinking of a place where we might stop halfway home to put out some more fire and earn another meal?" asked Frank.

"Huh! what d'ye take me for, a reservoir, a grain elevator or a cemetery? Now, I was thinking of that runaway chap in the striped suit. He went down-river, you know. What if we meet him?"

"In that case I rather guess Bill would hide in the brush. He's seen all he wants of this crowd for to-day. Don't you believe he'd attack us! The chances are he's got no weapons, having just escaped, and he knows he'd have little show with us empty handed. Forget Bill, Lanky. He's a back number so far as we're concerned," and Frank waved his chum aside.

The entire company came out to see them depart. Again there was a vigorous handshaking all around.

"Be sure and come and see us again soon, boys," said the motherly Mrs. Baxter, as she stood there, her gray head covered by a gingham apron.

"We'll certainly drop in on you whenever we're up this way again, good folks," declared Frank,

breaking away from the detaining hands of the girls.

"If you ever need a lively hustling lot of firemen, just remember us, will you, please; and let it be on a holiday too," cried Lanky, with one of his rare smiles.

And so they walked away toward the river, chatting as they went. Several times Lanky turned around to wave his handkerchief, and the others of course joked him unmercifully.

"Which is it you're waving farewell to, Lanky, that glorious dinner, or the red-cheeked girl, Dora Baxter?" demanded Ralph.

"You think it's smart, don't you, to say that?" retorted the other, indignantly. "Well, just turn your head and look back. Is that a turkey rack you see waving a kerchief after me, or does it look like a plump little girl, with the prettiest eyes and rosiest cheeks you ever saw?"

"Beg your pardon, old fellow. You've made an impression, all right. How is it you didn't know this Dora before? Didn't they used to live somewhere near you?" Ralph asked, curiously.

"She was away most all the time at her grand-ma's away up in the State. I reckon, part of the family stay there, now that the old folks are getting feeble. There's a heap more of 'em than you saw to-day. Hey! what was that moved in the bushes

up yonder? Bet you it was that critter sneaking back."

But it turned out to be a foraging pig that had escaped from the sty, and was apparently wandering around looking for some soft spot to root, which it was hardly likely to find in such bitter wintry weather.

But the conversation was not resumed at the point where the interruption occurred, and so Ralph never knew just how large a family the farmer possessed.

They reached the stream, and again fastened on their skates.

"Don't know whether I can keep up with you fellows," groaned Lanky, as he started to strike out; "but please don't leave me far behind. That striped zebra might think it a fine chance to take it out on me for his being chased away up yonder."

"What if he did? Think of the pleasure of suffering for the family of rosy cheeked Baxters. Don't you imagine that Dora would think more of you than ever if you captured that fellow single-handed? It might be the chance of a lifetime to win imperishable glory," taunted Frank.

"Rats! What I'm thinking of is being able to skate so soon after dining. 'Taint the right thing to do. All doctors agree on that. We ought to lie around for an hour or so. Hold up, fellows, not

quite so rapid a pace to begin with. Remember your wise old plan, Frank, and have mercy."

But after he found himself warmed up Lanky was better able to put forth more exertion, and do himself justice. The three sped along like the wind, and the miles were placed behind them as if by magic.

"What time was it when we started?" asked Ralph.

"A little after one," replied Frank, who carried a watch.

"And how far is Columbia from the farm?"

"Something like fifteen miles, I should judge, by the river; not more than a dozen by the road," continued Frank, readily.

"Well, the way we're going we ought to bring up at home by half-past two at the latest. And there's a train at two-twelve," Ralph went on, as if talking to himself.

"Poor fellow," muttered Frank, on hearing these words. "I wish his weary watch was over with. But it can't last much longer now. Any day, any hour, I feel that he is going to be made the happiest boy in all Columbia. And he deserves the best there is, Ralph does."

On they pushed resistlessly. Once or twice Lanky thought he caught a glimpse of something in the bushes that looked like the striped suit worn by the

man who had escaped from confinement, but none of the others bothered their heads on this score.

"There's Clifford!" said Frank, as they turned a bend, and saw skaters on the ice; but without stopping to bandy words with any of them they kept straight along.

"And that's Rattail Island ahead," remarked Ralph, presently, "just two miles now, and we'll be home."

As they swept past the island both Frank and Lanky looked toward the shack on the shore; but no signs of the tramp could they see.

"I guess he's away, trying to sell some of the fish he caught this morning. It's a pretty blue Christmas for poor Bill, perhaps," commented Frank.

"Bill—seems like I was going to say it then, and plague take it if the words didn't just stick in my throat," groaned Lanky, shaking his head.

Then they sighted the outlying houses of Columbia ahead, and none of them were sorry, for they were somewhat stiff, and a trifle sore.

Once ashore Ralph and Frank said good-bye to Lanky, and hurried toward the railroad station, for Ralph could not contain his impatience longer.

CHAPTER XVII

LANKY'S LUCKY DAY

"THERE's a wreck up the road!"

"What?" cried Frank, looking at the blue-coated official in sudden horror and alarm as he said these words.

Poor Ralph could not utter a single sound. He stood there as if rooted to the spot, his face suddenly turning as white as chalk, and his eyes filled with an expression of mute agony.

"Everything tied up tighter than a drum. Going to put us all back for twenty-four hours, not to speak of the loss to the company," continued the railroad man.

"But—was it the train due here at two-twelve." Frank went on, determined to know the worst.

"Oh! no, nothing so bad as that. Just a couple of freights that thought they could pass each other on a single track. It ain't ever been done yet, but some fellers keep on trying. It's an awful smash, and the passenger train is held beyond. They're

getting the wrecking crew to work, but it may be nine o'clock before that express comes in here."

A sigh behind him told Frank that his chum had experienced great relief. The suspense was to be prolonged, it seemed; but better a thousand times that than to hear of life being sacrificed.

"You say nothing happened to the express," continued Frank.

"Why, of course not. It wasn't within thirty miles of the place when the smash came along. We're a single track road, and till they get the wreck cleared up or burnt nary a train can get by. Expecting any one on her, Frank?" said the official, who, like nearly every other inhabitant of Columbia, knew the lad because of the prominent part he had always taken in the athletic triumphs of the high school boys upon track, diamond and gridiron.

"No, but my friend was. Come on, Ralph; there's no use waiting around here if the train can't get in until to-night. Let's go to the house and rest up the balance of the day. We sure deserve it," and linking his arm in that of his chum Frank walked away.

"Oh! what a scare he gave me!" said Ralph; "what if it had been the express that was wrecked, and I lost my mother even before I had ever know her? You don't blame me for feeling trembly like, do you, Frank?"

"Well, I guess not. It was enough to give any fellow a scare. But try and forget it now. We can have dinner nicely at seven, and then walk over to see the stalled train come in. If Uncle Jim and the lady are aboard we'll be there to meet them. But I'm surprised that he never wired you from San Francisco when the steamer docked. It isn't like my lawyer uncle. Perhaps they missed the *Empress of Japan* after all, and are coming on the next boat."

"That may be so; but somehow I seem to feel it right here that she is near me. Perhaps she wanted to surprise me, and that is why they didn't wire. But I've waited so long now, I suppose a few hours more or less won't matter much," and Ralph again sighed.

Leaving the station they went on to find that Mr. Allen had arrived from the south on a train that came in an hour previous. He quickly noticed several burns in Frank's coat, and asking questions was soon told the whole story. Frank was for belittling the adventure, but his father being a business man, asked leading questions, even turning to Ralph to help out.

In this way he heard all, even to the chase of the escaped convict, who had undoubtedly set the farmhouse afire the better to hide his robbery.

"Remarkable," he declared, after the story was

finished, and looking at Frank with a glow of pride in his eyes that made the poor fatherless Ralph quite envy his fortunate chum. "You three fellows deserve high praise for what you did. I imagine Baxter might have lost that new house of his only for your help."

"Oh! hardly that, dad. They'd have got their wits together soon, and done what we did in good time. We just happened to start things going, that's all?" said Frank, who somehow always tried to belittle his own work while ready to applaud that of a friend or chum, even an enemy on occasion.

"Well, you may say so, but I doubt it. I know men, and that once they get rattled and lose their heads nothing can be done unless some strong-minded fellow happens along to take the lead. But by the way, it's strange that your meeting with Baxter has just reminded me of a matter that slipped my mind in the hurry of going to keep that appointment in New York City. And this is the twenty-fifth too, making the paper due to-morrow. It's too bad, and Baxter will be put to no end of trouble if he doesn't get that paper in my hands by eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"What's that, sir?" asked Frank, with a vague idea that his father had for once let a cog slip in his usually well organized machine.

"Why, you see, Baxter has a paper which I told

him I would send for before it was needed. In going away so suddenly on important business I quite allowed that fact to slip my mind. I shall have to send some one up for it, I suppose; but the trouble is who to send. This is Christmas, and everybody wants to stick home."

"Why not let me go, dad?" demanded Frank, immediately.

"But think of all you boys have been through to-day. It's a shame to let you go on such an errand, when I might run up myself," continued the gentleman.

But Frank laughed to scorn the idea of his being tired.

"Why, even if I was," he remarked, "what is it to sit in a comfortable car, and spin along over the road like fun? Hey, Ralph, what do you say, could you stand a run up there and back? It's just three o'clock now. What's twelve miles in a good machine? What do you say, Ralph?"

"Count me in, Frank. Anything to pass the time away until nine o'clock," he said.

Mr. Allen looked puzzled.

"You see, he's expecting Uncle Jim and that lady on the train that was due nearly half an hour ago, and that accident to the freights up the road has blocked things so the express has to lie over up there, and won't get in till nine. But tell me what

you want done, sir, and we'll go right away," and Frank started to hunt out a couple of warm fur coats that could be used on the trip.

Rather reluctantly Mr. Allen complied. Still, he needed some one to speed up to the new home of the Baxters and secure that paper which should have been in his possession long ere this. It was his error of judgment too, and hence he could not think of allowing the rich farmer to suffer from it.

"Well, what do you think of this, Ralph? Ever see such a tremendous day? Seems as though everything were knocked into one long line of happenings. And I hope, pard, that it will wind up with just the most glorious luck for you. Why, by the way things are running, it just can't help it, that's what. Say, suppose Lanky happened to spy us whirling past his house, and heading up that way, don't you think he'd whoop after us a little? Guess he'll believe one of us had gone sweet on that little rosy-cheeked Dora Baxter, and meant to make a quick call to see if there were any more fires that needed putting out."

Frank laughed at the conceit. They had bundled into the fine car owned by Mr. Allen, and which Frank knew well how to drive, for he had always taken a great interest in all sorts of mechanical devices.

Once upon the road they headed into town, as there was a short-cut Frank knew that would save more than a mile.

"Talk of an angel and you hear its wings!" cried Ralph, pointing, "for there's our chum Lanky right now, gaping at us. Pull in to the side of the road Frank!"

"Say, fellows, what's all this mean. Thought you could sneak past, and pretend not to see an old friend, eh?" exclaimed Lanky, as the car pulled in.

"Look at him, still dangling his skates!" cried Frank. "I declare if he's even been home since he left us. Now, what d'ye suppose the fellow has been doing all this half hour?"

"Seems to me as if he backed out of that restaurant yonder," suggested Ralph, wickedly.

At that Lanky threw up his hands in horror.

"That's just the limit, and me wondering how I'm ever going to do my share in getting away with the dinner my folks will spread out this same evening. Chuck it, boys, and let me down easy. But where are you off to, so gay? Seems to me you're in an awful big hurry for a ride, so soon after getting back from that long run?"

Frank pretended to look at Ralph in a guilty way.

"No use, Ralph, he's on, all right. You'll have

to find another pair of rosy cheeks, it seems," he remarked.

"What's that? demanded Lanky, suspiciously.

"Why, you see, to tell the honest truth, we were on our way back to the farm," admitted Frank, as if apologizing.

"What farm? Look here, you don't mean Baxter's place, do you," asked the other.

Frank nodded.

"Leave anything behind?" continued Lanky, firmly.

"Well, there was some talk of a fellow forgetting his heart when he came away. We thought we might go up and look for it. Little good he'd be as a hockey rover, without that useful article."

"Oh! quit your kidding, Frank. And make room in there, fellows. I'm going along with you, see?" with which Lanky deliberately squeezed in alongside Ralph, who occupied the tonneau seat.

"Did you ever see such nerve?" exclaimed Frank, as he once more started the car, "nobody asked him, but he comes anyhow. Here, get that rug around you, Lanky. It's cold work riding at a mile a minute clip. And as we hum along perhaps friend Ralph there will whisper to you just why we're once more bound for our old stamping grounds. It's no fire this time, only a document needed."

When Lanky learned of the peculiar circumstance that was taking his comrades up to the Baxter place, he just lay back and grinned amid the furry robes.

"My lucky day, boys, and you can't deny it; else why did I meet you again?" he remarked.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PUZZLE SOLVED

"GOING to cross over at Clifford?" asked Ralph, after they were well started.

"The upper bridge will do better. You see the road is much finer on our side of the river. I've been over them all many times, and ought to know," replied Frank.

"Haven't let that zebra drop out of your minds, have you, boys?" asked Lanky.

"Oh! that poor chap isn't going to hug the public roads," remarked Frank, positively, "he knows it would be too dangerous for an escaped prisoner. By this time I guess he's hovering around some other lonely farmhouse, bent on getting some food and a change of clothes. He can't go anywhere with those striped things on."

"Do you know I've somehow got an idea he'll follow the river down," said Ralph.

"If he does he'll hit up with our friend Bill—Bill—oh, the fellow on Rattail Island. I thought

I was just going to say it then, but I didn't, not so you could notice it. And Bill has been warned, so he'll be on the watch. Three hundred dollars did they say, Frank? That would be a mighty nice little nest-egg for Bill, and buy him a new evening suit," laughed Lanky.

"Hold your jaw, now, fellows; I'm going to hit her up right here. You'll get the toothache if you talk in this cold wind," remarked Frank, as he gave the speedy car her head over a smooth stretch of road.

They fairly flew.

"Say, makes me think I was on my little *Humming Bird*, right now!" shouted Lanky; for the wheels of the car were making more or less noise upon the frozen surface of the road, so that speaking in an ordinary voice was next to impossible.

Frank did not dare turn to look at him while going at this forty miles an hour speed; but he allowed his form to shake as if with silent laughter.

"I bet you she goes better than this old machine ever could, and you can say what you please," observed Lanky, standing up stoutly for the prized product of his hands and brain.

Had it been summer and the road in first-class condition Frank would have raised his machine to top-notch speed; but he had already reached the limit of safety under the circumstances, and was

not to be tempted to hasten faster. He imagined that Lanky, in his impatience to get to the farmhouse the sooner, was only nagging him on for a purpose.

"We're getting there, all right," the eager one finally said, as, having crossed the narrow river by means of a bridge they once more headed north.

"Given five minutes more and we'll arrive. What are you craning your neck for, in that way, Lanky? Think you see smoke again?" demanded Frank, as he felt the other thrusting his head close to his shoulder.

"Oh! shucks! no. I just wanted to get the first squint of the house on the little hill," replied the other.

"He's even got his handkerchief ready to wave," asserted Ralph.

"Bless his innocent little heart, does he suppose that poor girl has been standing there all this time watching for his return?" jeered the driver.

"Have your fun, sillies," answered Lanky, composedly. "It doesn't feaze me one little bit. There, I can see a peak of the house, boys. It's all right."

"He speaks as though he might have been worried about whether the fire started up again after we left, and finished the job. No, the red-cheeked Dora still has a stout roof over her pretty head. And as

sure as you live, there she is, standing in the doorway, waving to us!" cried Ralph.

"Where? Let me see!" and Lanky stood up to make sure; after which he deliberately pulled out his handkerchief, and answered the greeting.

Dora, it turned out, had just been about going out to feed the chickens when she saw the car turn in at their gate; and possibly waved without knowing who the occupants were, though she never admitted that much.

The surprise of the farmer and his good wife was great when they saw the trio of lads who had eaten dinner with them but a few hours since, come whirling up to the door in a handsome car.

"We've come to supper!" exclaimed Frank, with a broad smile.

"Don't you believe him, sir," cried Lanky, indignantly; "he's got an errand to do for his father, Mr. Allen. And the rest of us came along to make sure he didn't get lost. He needs a keeper most of the time."

"Come in, boys," said the farmer, as he shook hands all around; "we didn't dream we'd see you so soon, though Dora I believe, did say she thought you'd be up again before a great while. You're welcome to stay a week with us if you will."

Frank looked at Ralph and winked.

"You see, Dora knew. I told you Lanky wasn't

asking all those questions about how you got here by road for nothing. Thank you, sir, we'll go in for a little while. My father did send me up to get something from you," he remarked.

"Oh! you must mean that document. I was thinking of it last night when I took it out of the lower drawer of my desk to look over it, and it struck me then that he said he would send for it before the time had elapsed. To think of you coming all the way back here, after what you've been through to-day. It's mighty kind of you, Frank, and the rest of you, too."

"Don't mention it, sir. Why, it's just prime fun to sit there and be whirled along at a mile a minute clip. Better than the labor of skating, easy though that is. And so far as the rest of the bunch goes, why, they were only too glad to come. I couldn't keep one of them away, for he piled in as soon as he heard we were headed for the Baxter ranch."

Lanky scowled at Frank, and made threatening gestures, to which, however, the other paid little attention.

So the three boys followed the farmer into the sitting-room. Here it was, Lanky remembered having seen him groping in the smoke and trying to drag his desk toward the door, it doubtless holding all his papers of consequence, since there was no house safe visible.

"Just sit down for a minute, please, and I'll get the document."

Mr. Baxter drew open the large lower drawer of his desk. After fumbling around a short time he bent lower to look closer. Then he seemed to grow a bit excited, for getting down on his knees he started a systematic search through the entire contents of the almost full drawer.

"Strange! I put it there last night, and now it isn't to be found at all! I declare that drawer must be bewitched. It isn't the first time something has vanished from it," they heard him mutter, as he stared at the jumble of papers.

"What's wrong, Mr. Baxter?" asked Frank, interested in spite of himself.

"Why, that paper's gone! I know it was safe last night, for I remember putting it there, and locking the drawer. It was locked now, you saw, but the document has strangely disappeared," he said, as if greatly worried.

"Say, it couldn't be possible that rascal who set fire to the house nabbed it, could it?" suggested Lanky, promptly.

The farmer looked uneasily at Frank.

"Nonsense! I don't believe he was in here at all. You remember that the whole family had gathered here. I suppose there was somebody in this room every minute of the time all morning, and up to our

arrival. You see the drawer is well filled with papers, Mr. Baxter; do you generally have it that way?" he asked.

"Why, yes, usually so," came the ready reply; "but why do you ask that, Frank?"

"I was thinking that possibly the paper might have caught when you pulled the drawer open just now. In that case it would have fallen down behind, or underneath. Suppose you let me see, sir?"

Frank immediately got down on his knees. It was the work of a second to pull the lower drawer completely out, leaving a yawning cavity, into which he thrust his arm, while the others watched with deep interest.

"I feel something—there, is that your document, sir?" and Frank handed over the rustling paper he had drawn forth.

"As sure as you live. Well, it seems as though I'm always going to be indebted to you boys for favors. But what are you after now, Frank?" for again was the other reaching in the cavity.

"I thought I felt something else in there, sir. You see there's quite a vacancy between the bottom of the drawer and the base board of the desk," and even while he was speaking Frank drew forth another object, which he passed over to the hands of the old farmer, which were visibly trembling as

they received the same, so that he nearly let it fall to the floor.

Lanky and Ralph saw that it was an old but stout looking pocketbook. It had evidently been lying snugly in that cavity a long while, and might have continued there, its presence unknown and unsuspected, only for the valuable paper being lost, and found through Frank's ingenuity.

Mr. Baxter sat there on the floor staring at that old pocketbook as though its unexpected reappearance had frightened him. He handled it reverently as he undid the strap, and opening the leather receptacle disclosed a large amount of money in bills.

One would think the recovery of such a treasure ought to make any person laugh with joy. It seemed to have just the contrary effect on him, for he groaned from the depths of his heart, and shook his head, while tears dropped on the pocketbook.

"Oh! may Heaven forgive me for my cruelty," he said, bitterly, as he continued to stare at the object he held in his hand; "to think that I refused to believe him when he declared he had never touched this money. And that I drove him away from his home, and sent him out into the cold world, to become perhaps a thief, and the companion of thieves! Oh! Willie! my poor boy, how could I know? And now it is revealed too late to do any

good. Willie! I would give all I have to see you once again, and start fresh; but it's too late, too late!"

Frank and Ralph looked at each other, with sympathy in their eyes. But Lanky jumping to his feet plainly excited, muttering:

"Willie! Willie Baxter; that's it! I've got it, Frank! Didn't I tell you I knew it would come to me sooner or later. Willie! 'call me just Bill!' he said. Don't you see, it's all right. He said don't you know 'they're gone, and I'm out in the cold?' He was hoping to eat Christmas dinner with his folks, poor old top! Shake hands on it, Frank. You see it's got to be a pretty tough tangle that gets me *all* the time. Oh! you Bill, I know you now, if you have grown older, and raised a beard. Hurrah!"

CHAPTER XIX

FOUND AT LAST

FRANK put a finger to his lips, and with another hand warned Lanky.

"Why, I tell you it's all right, Frank; I've guessed that puzzle," said the other; but Frank drew him hastily aside.

Mr. Baxter still sat there upon the floor, and seemed to be so utterly lost in contemplation of the recovered pocketbook that he had apparently heard not a word of what Lanky said.

"It's sure him, Frank, his boy Willie. I used to know him about four years ago. He was a tall boy then, a young man I guess, and looked sickly. When he went off people around here thought he was with his grandfather up-state. Now you heard what he said. He believed the boy stole that pocketbook. They had a squabble, and Willie hit it for the tramps' paradise. I reckon the old man will be mighty glad to get him back again."

"Keep, still, can't you, Lanky?" urged Frank;

"it's all very fine to imagine such a thing; but suppose you made a mistake—think of the grief of this couple? He hasn't noticed anything you said, so just keep a quiet tongue in your head a little while longer."

"But Frank, sure you wouldn't keep him in suspense any longer, now that he knows he wronged the boy," protested Lanky, plainly disturbed.

"A few more hours won't hurt any," persisted his chum, "and it'll give you a chance to make good. You want to be dead sure you're right before you tell him. See Bill, and put it to him straight. Then, if he confesses, bring him here, or take the old man to him. Do you get my point now?"

"Y—es," replied Lanky, somewhat slowly, as if loth to postpone the pleasant surprise he hoped to spring on the parents of pretty Dora Baxter.

"Then get that look off your face. Anybody would believe you knew the secrets of the universe to watch you. Try and seem natural. He's getting up, now, and begins to realize that he isn't alone."

Mr. Baxter slowly reached his feet. His face was white, and in his eyes rested a most forlorn and mournful look. Frank's heart reproached him for having influenced Lanky to hold off even for a short time, because it seemed to be only adding to the load being borne by the repentant father.

"It's too bad," muttered Lanky.

"Hold to your promise, now. Besides, if he was so hasty as to believe circumstantial evidence, even when the boy denied it, perhaps he deserves to suffer a little more remorse before you lift the curtain. Not a word, now, Lanky!"

So Lanky, still hardly convinced that he was doing what was best, half turned his head away as Mr. Baxter approached, as though unwilling to face him.

"You see, boys, this pocketbook has been lost for several years. I never once dreamed that it could have slipped back of that drawer. Fifty times have I taken every scrap out of the thing, in the hopes of finding it somewhere. And to think it was lying there within a foot of my hand all the time; and I had been tempted to do the most foolish act of my whole life."

He sighed deeply and shook his head. Then he put the article away in his pocket, as though lacking the will just then to show it to his wife. He knew what bitter memories it would arouse.

"Is there anything needed done with this document, Mr. Baxter?" asked Frank.

"You mean in the way of signatures? No, all that has been duly attended to, and I was only waiting for your father to send for it as he promised. The excitement of moving drove it out of my head until last night. Just hand it to him,

Frank. And tell him about the strange finding of the pocketbook. He will understand, for he was my counsellor at the time; only in my stubbornness I declined to follow his advice. Would to Heaven that I had."

"Then we might as well go," returned Frank, as he caught the eye of Ralph, who had been a silent but deeply interested witness of these strange scenes.

Lanky had sought out Dora and was already laughing and chatting, as though he had succeeded in readily chasing the other matter out of his mind.

"Going so soon?" he exclaimed, plainly showing his disgust.

"Why, yes, as this was a mere business trip, and not a visit. Some other time, perhaps, we can run up to stay longer," remarkd Frank, winking at Ralph.

"Well, I suppose I must, if you say so, because there's no other way to get back home except to skate, and I'm too tired to try that long trip again," and Lanky accordingly bade adieu to the merry red-cheeked girl who seemed to have made considerable of an impression on him.

"What time is it now, Frank?" he demanded, as they stood alongside the car.

"Lacks three minutes of four. We've been here more than half an hour, you see," was the reply.

"What's a measly half hour among friends, hey?"

asked Lanky, "might just as well hooked up till five or half-past. Why, this speedy spinner would take us home in twenty minutes or so, if we wanted. I didn't expect it of you, Frank. Thought you were a better friend of mine."

At that thrust Frank winced, and then laughed outright.

"I'm the best friend you've got, Lanky. A comrade often has to drag his chum away from temptation. Besides, I had other plans arranged, which I haven't seen fit to mention, yet."

"Oh! all right, just as you say. Anyhow I'm glad I came," and the other's face cleared like magic as he suddenly recollected that the great problem which had for so long been confronting him, was apparently solved.

"Of course you are. And take my advice about that matter. Be sure you're right before you awaken new hopes in the hearts of those good people. They've suffered enough as it is, and to excite their minds again only to meet disappointment I'd call positively a crime. All in?"

"I am, thank you," replied Ralph, who had donned the heavy wolfskin coat belonging to Frank's father.

"Ditto here," sang out Lanky; "this fine old bear-skin rug is just the boss when it comes to bucking up against a mile-a-minute breeze. Wish I had a

pair of goggles like you fellows. You see I am compelled to duck behind the glass wind shield pretty much all the time, or have my eyes blown out. Why, we'll be home by half-past four; and we don't have dinner till seven."

"Listen to him, wondering how he's ever going to hold out all that time. Here, I've got that cold lunch still in the pocket of my coat. You might grab that, and help tide over, old fellow," chuckled Frank, as he started the car.

"Thank you, but I reckon I can get on without a wedge between my two Christmas dinners. Careful of the gatepost now, in going out, Frank. Here! hold on," and Lanky actually thrust out an arm to pull at the sleeve of the grizzly coat Frank wore.

"What's the matter now?" asked the other, calmly.

"I must be all turned around," muttered Lanky.

"Well, it wouldn't be surprising. When a fellow persists in wanting to spend all his time at a house ten miles and more away from his home you might expect anything from him. What do you think, Lanky?" pursued the chauffeur.

"To tell the honest truth, Frank, I was thinking that Columbia lay in exactly the other quarter, back of us," confessed the bewildered boy.

"Well, it does," replied Frank, quietly.

"Then what under the sun are you heading this

way for? Believe that the longest way around is the shortest way to the fire, eh? Or are you meaning to give us a little more push for our money, now that we're out for sport?"

Ralph had started when Frank spoke. He looked at the driver of the car as Frank turned his head; for they were moving slowly as yet.

"Oh! I know," he exclaimed, with a thrill in his voice; "and it's awful good in you, Frank. I'll never forget it, never!"

"Here, what's all this mystery mean? Ain't I in the game at all?" demanded Lanky, indignantly.

"That's so, you haven't been told," remarked Frank. "You knew Ralph was expecting somebody on the train this afternoon. Well, we heard that there was a freight wreck about thirty miles up the road, and everything will be stalled until perhaps nine to-night. Since we're nearly half way up to the place I thought it might be nice to keep right on."

"Bully for you, Frank! A clever stunt it was for you to think of. And now we're headed for the scene of the wreck. Ralph, ain't it the boss thing to meet up with such a pard as that?" and Lanky clapped his companion on the back as he spoke.

"There never was such a chum before, and never will be again. I don't know what I don't owe to

him in the year I've known him. I'd go through fire and water if I could only hope to return one-tenth of the debt," said Ralph, a little brokenly, for the poor fellow was much disturbed.

"Don't say that, Ralph, when you know the pleasure I've had out of your company has already more than paid me back for any little things I may have done. Get that notion out of your head. And now cuddle down, Lanky, for here's where we hit it up lively."

They were quickly flying along the road again, headed north as a general rule. Frank was compelled to pay strict attention to his business, for there were poor stretches where it became necessary to steer with great caution, or slacken the speed considerably.

Ralph had said nothing for ten minutes, and Lanky knew enough to keep what he called a "stop on the clapper of his bell," for talking is next to impossible when making such swift progress.

No doubt Ralph was thinking of what lay ahead of him, and hugging wild hopes to his heart. The past had been leading up to this climax for more than a year. Ever since that first remittance had reached him, with its strange note, advising him to secure the education he craved, doubtless Ralph had wondered, and dreamed dreams, as any boy with an imagination may build castles in Spain.

"Whoa!" said Lanky, as they suddenly whirled around a bend at a reduced pace, though still going fairly fast.

Frank immediately turned off the "juice," as Lanky called it, and put on the brake, so that the forty horse-power machine came to a speedy halt.

The short December day was at its close. Already it could be said to be twilight, and things were growing a little dim in the distance. Frank would have had to stop and light up presently, even if this halt had not been forced upon him.

"Looks like an accident of some sort," he remarked, as the car now started slowly toward the spot where another of the same sort was halted by the roadside, with a number of persons busily engaged around.

"Same old story," gurgled Lanky; "those who ride in automobubbles must expect to meet up with disappointments. Room to get by, Frank?"

"Oh! plenty. But let's stop and see if we can be of any assistance."

"There's a couple of chaps sprawled out under the car, and I reckon they ought to be enough to do the trick. But you're always ready to do the Good Samaritan act, I know, so pull up then," grumbled Lanky, who wanted to be always on the move.

Frank allowed his car to stop within a few feet

of the other. He saw that there was a lady in the other machine, but she was a stranger to him.

"Can we be of any assistance to you?" he asked aloud, meaning that the two who were half way under the stalled racer should hear him.

One of them came hastily wriggling out.

"Hello! Frank, is that you?" said a voice that thrilled the boy.

"Uncle Jim!" he exclaimed.

Ralph jumped to his feet, tossing the goggles aside. Instantly his eager eyes were glued upon the form of the lady in the other car. She too had half risen at the words of her companion, and it could been seen that she was anxiously looking at the three boys.

"What is it, Mr. Allen? Oh! please tell me!" she exclaimed, tremblingly.

"Why, here's my nephew Frank, happened along just in time to give us a lift in our necessity. And unless my eyes deceive me this fine young chap here——"

Ralph could not be kept back a second longer. He sprang wildly out of the car, and to the side of the other. The lady leaned forward. She caught hold of his arm and drew him closer, for the light was very poor.

Frank Allen fairly held his breath. He could not have moved for a kingdom just then. One

long eager look she took, while the boy stood there. It was enough. Just what her loving mother heart saw words could never paint; but she suddenly drew Ralph into her embrace, and simply whispered the most delightful words that had ever fallen upon the ears of the tempest-tossed lad:

“My boy! My own boy!”

CHAPTER XX

SUCH A GLORIOUS DAY

EVEN stoical Lanky was deeply affected by the sight. He turned his head away, and in secret drew out his handkerchief to wipe his eyes.

But boys can soon recover from such emotions. The lady and Ralph were talking confidences, forgetting the whole world around them in their great joy.

"What's to hinder you both getting in with us and going to Columbia, Uncle Jim?" remarked Frank aside, after he had lighted his lamps.

"Nothing at all, if you can crowd us in. I'll pay this man off, and let him fix his old car as he pleases. It was the best we could get to carry us along. She was fretting her poor heart out over the delay at the end of the long trip, and since it promised to save us some hours we finally hunted up a man who owned a machine, and started. But it has been slow work. This is the third breakdown, mind you."

Judge Jim laughed as he spoke. He had been

away from his law practice for months now, in this chase for Mrs. Langworthy, who was flitting from one country to another with her brother, Arnold Musgrove. But as he said, he needed a long rest, and she, being immensely wealthy, would see to it that he did not suffer financially for his devotion to her cause.

"We're going to ask you to change cars, Mrs. Langworthy. So please gather up your things, and make the move, while I settle with our friend here," said the lawyer, breaking in on the communion of the two happy souls.

Ralph immediately insisted on helping his mother out and into the other car, as well as securing her small packages, her luggage being still on the train.

"Now we're ready to move along," observed Uncle Jim, cheerfully, as he crowded in alongside the couple occupying the tonneau of Frank's vehicle.

Lanky had become wonderfully quiet. He sat there beside Frank, Ralph having given him the goggles and the fur coat he had worn; while the big rug sufficed to keep him warm. Lanky was thinking deeply. This had indeed been the most eventful day in all his young life, and he could never forget what had come under his observation between the hours of sunrise and twilight.

Doubtless a goodly share of his thoughts concerned the heart burnings of the old farmer, at dis-

covering what a great wrong he had done his oldest boy years back. And Lanky, being impulsive, determined that before he slept that night he must know the positive truth concerning the tramp of Rattail Island.

"How surprised father will be when you walk in on him, Uncle Jim?" remarked Frank, over his shoulder when they had gone ten miles or so at an even pace.

"I imagine he will be; and what a joyous company we ought to be to-night! You're going to hear all about the wild chase I had after this energetic lady here; who is certainly a great traveler, and fond of seeing sights that fall to none other of her sex. But perhaps now she will feel like staying at home more, since there is no longer any necessity for trying to forget," replied the judge.

"Indeed, I shall never want to leave him again, never! Heaven has been so good to me, I cannot be thankful enough. And I strongly suspect that I owe most of my present happiness to Frank Allen," said Mrs. Langworthy, positively.

"Hear! hear! I second the motion!" exclaimed Lanky, trying to clap his hands.

"Keep quiet, you, Lanky! Want to make me run into a tree, or do something like that?" exclaimed Frank, to hide his embarrassment.

As they crossed over the bridge at Clifford, Lanky

looked eagerly down the river, as though hoping he might even see a campfire on Rattail Island; but it was too far away for this. He shook his head stubbornly.

"I won't get out now, but as sure as fate I'm going to come up here again to-night, tired or not, and settle that question once and for good," he was muttering.

In a very few minutes now they had arrived at the Allen home. In front of the house Frank brought the car to a full stop. Uncle Jim was already out, and Ralph was oh! so tenderly, helping his mother to alight. How proudly she leaned on his arm, as though the happiest woman in the world!

"Hey, Frank," said Lanky, as he too jumped from the machine, "I don't know how you feel about it, and it's a shame to ask you to move another step to-night; but along about nine o'clock I'm going to skate up to see Bill. Consider that an invitation to come along, though I reckon you'll be so busy listening to the wonderful things here you'll never dream of accepting."

Frank, however, surprised and delighted the other by instantly replying:

"That's where you're wrong, old fellow. Call in here for me when the time comes. And excuse me now, for I want to be in the reception committee."

Lanky limped off, whistling, while Frank ascended the steps, his legs seeming almost like two sticks, after all the violent exercise of that wonderful day.

Mr. Allen was indeed surprised when he saw his brother Jim. And moreover, both he and his good wife showed the keenest delight when they discovered that the impressive looking middle-aged lady back of the lawyer had her arm around Ralph.

They knew from that it was all right, and that the poor boy's long night had indeed changed into a glorious dawn.

It was a happy party that sat down to that Christmas cheer. Uncle Jim declared that he did not mean to speak one word about his amazing search until the following day, when they would be in better condition to listen to his story, and also that of the lady.

He simply observed that he had finally come upon them, and that upon being accused of kidnapping the only child of his rich sister many years before, Arnold Musgrove had confessed the truth, and then fled, never wanting to look again on the face of the one he had wronged so terribly.

Some pangs of remorse had evidently caused him to show a desire to assist the boy who had suffered because of his plotting. Of course in the end this relenting had been the means of his undoing. Many

times wicked men are thus brought to book through circumstances which they set in motion themselves.

Frank, though dead tired, was supremely happy. He had seen one delightful solution to a deep mystery, and there promised to be still another. More than once he half resolved to change his mind with regard to going out again that night; but if Lanky could stand it, there was no reason why he should not.

When he had a few minutes to speak with his father later he concluded to tell him all about it.

"You got that paper, I hope, Frank?" Mr. Allen had remarked.

"Oh! yes, sir; I laid it in the top drawer of your desk. Be careful when you open it that the document is not drawn back and lost," remarked Frank.

His father look curiously at him, for this was rather an odd remark to make.

"I can plainly see that you have some object in saying that, my boy," he smiled.

"I have, for within a few hours it happens, that I've seen such a thing occur. Father, you knew all about Willie Baxter, didn't you?"

"Yes. His father consulted with me at the time he lost that pocketbook. Perhaps I shouldn't confide this to you; but something tells me that you already know of it. Did the farmer tell you?" asked the gentleman.

"No. But I happened to be instrumental in discovering the long-lost pocketbook," replied the boy, proudly.

"What? Do you mean it's been found again? Then I was right, and he wrong. Well, I'm glad, and sorry at the same time; for while Baxter knows now that Willie was innocent of that crime, four years have passed without his seeing the boy. The chances are he will never set eyes on him again; for Willie may have died, or be an inmate of some prison, sent there through that act of his foolish father."

"Oh! it may not be so bad as that. To tell the truth, father, we believe we know right now, Lanky and I, where we can put our hands on Willie Baxter!" and Frank looked with elation into the deeply interested face of his parent.

"How does that come, Frank?" demanded the gentleman, showing great concern.

"Why, Lanky suddenly remembered when he heard Mr. Baxter muttering to himself on handling that pocketbook and mentioning the name of Willie, that Bill was a corruption of that name. You know Lanky has been trying his level best to recollect where he had ever before met that tramp who is camped on Rattail Island. Then he knew that Bill must be Willie Baxter, grown older, and wearing a beard on his face!"

"Here, now that you've excited my curiosity, just sit down five minutes and tell me what happened up there when you dropped in on Baxter. I can see that it must have been something out of the common run," declared the gentleman, pulling Frank down beside him on the lounge.

"Oh! it was, I can tell you, sir. It just thrilled us through and through. If you could have seen the old gentleman sitting there on the floor, and fondling that found pocketbook, while he was reproaching himself all the time for his cruelty to Willie, you'd say the same. I'll never forget it, nor will Lanky."

"Stop that, and commence to talk coherently. It's all like Greek to me, remember."

So Frank gave a rapid sketch of what had really happened to make him investigate back of the lower drawer in Mr. Baxter's desk; and what he had found there besides the missing document.

"It's really amazing how things come out," the gentleman declared, with feeling. "And to think that my boy has been instrumental in bringing about happiness in two different quarters! I'm well satisfied with your course, Frank. A man never had a boy dearer to his heart than you are to your mother and myself. When will you see this poor fellow up there in his lonely camp, and bring him good cheer—in the morning, I hope?"

At that Frank laughed.

"Oh! Lanky couldn't sleep a wink unless he finished that part of his job to-night. So he's going to drop around here about nine, and we'll take a little run up the river to interview Bill," he remarked.

"I'm afraid you're overdoing this thing. You must be ready to drop after going through what you have to-day. Better wait until morning, son," cautioned Mr. Allen.

"If I did, Lanky wouldn't; and I want to see Bill when he hears the good news. I feel better since that second dinner. Eating so much is more apt to founder us than the exercise, for we're used to that. To skate four miles doesn't require much exertion. I'll be careful, dad, I promise you," Frank continued.

"Well, it's about nine o'clock now, and there's a ring at the door, so I suppose Clarence has arrived on time," laughed the gentleman—it was usually only at home Lanky went by his real name, and it always sounded odd to hear it.

"Will you try and keep Mrs. Langworthy and Ralph here over night?" asked Frank.

"Certainly; we won't think of her leaving us to go to the hotel; and I'm sure she would not be happy away from her new-found son. It does us good just to see the great joy in his eyes. Helen is par-

ticularly rejoiced; for she has always been deeply interested in Ralph's fortunes, ever since you first told us about him."

Frank hurried out, to find Lanky waiting in the hall.

"Going back on your pard, Frank?" asked the other, anxiously.

"Did you ever know me to?" demanded Frank.

"N—no, can't say I ever did, but you see just now you might be excused for wanting to stick home, where there's so much going on. Glad you're going to take the little turn with me. It's lonesome skating by yourself at night. But horses couldn't hold me back, once I've made my mind up."

"As if I didn't know that, Lanky. Wait up till I get on my sweater and heavy pea-jacket, and then I'll be with you. I want to tell you though, right now, that I'm as stiff as an old man of ninety. When I sit down I can hardly get up out of my chair again. Just think what we've been through to-day, will you?" said Frank.

"Oh! that'll all wear off before you get to the ice," remarked Lanky, cheerfully. "I'm somewhat cracked myself, and every time I take a step it seems like my bones would creak like a rusty hinge. But think of that poor old chap sitting by his lonely fire, with not a bit of good cheer, and this Christmas

night, too! Why, I'd be tempted to try and get there if I was afraid I'd drop on the way."

"Don't I know it? You've got the biggest heart ever, Lanky. But then you deserve all the pleasure that's coming to you in this thing. Haven't you been worrying your head nearly off about who Bill was? And I've been thinking about it too; I guess you must be right, for I can remember that he does look something like Dora."

"There, that'll do for you," retorted the other. "Ready? Then strike out for the river, and we'll be flying up in three shakes of a lamb's tail. Move on!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE CAMPFIRE ON RATTAIL ISLAND

"GIVE us a hand, Frank. Honest, now, I'm that stiff I can't get up myself," and Lanky, after making several violent efforts, sank back with a grunt.

"Here you are, then; but it's a case of the blind helping the blind. I'm not much better off myself, though able to move without a crutch," with which remark Frank jerked his chum erect.

"Tip us your fin, and we'll do a double shuffle. In union there is strength, you know," laughed the afflicted one.

"Yes, and the tumble will be all the more complete if we both go over in a heap. But I guess those long legs of yours will soon get working all right, Lanky."

"Why, I feel better already. Once warmed up, and the joints begin to work without so much creaking. But, honest Injun, Frank, I don't seem to hanker after this little skate as much as usual."

"Same here. But it won't be long. We're about

half way up to the island now, and still going some," remarked the other in his optimistic fashion.

"And methinks I see a glimpse of a fire beyond, unless my eyes deceive me. What do you make out, partner?" asked Lanky.

"I thought I did too, a bit ago, but some tree must have come between. No, there it is again. That's Bill's campfire, all right, never fear, Lanky."

"Bill, I reckon, will be some surprised to set eyes on us, eh?" chuckled the bearer of good tidings, well pleased with his mission.

"I don't see how he could well help it," returned Frank.

"I hope nothing stops us in our little game," remarked the other.

"See here, are you beginning to have doubts already? Is it possible that after all you said, you're not quite so dead sure as you might be that this Bill of Rattail Island is little Willie, the long-lost sheep of the Baxters?" demanded Frank, pretending to be very severe, which he was not by any means.

"Oh! no, it isn't that. I was only wondering whether anything could have happened to Bill since we saw him last. It struck me then that he was kind of in the dumps. I hope he's all right," said Lanky.

"Oh! splash! you're tired, and only trying to

imagine things, that's all. Look for yourself, and see his fire burning. That's evidence of Bill being on the spot. And just then I saw some person pass in front of the blaze. It's all right, Lanky."

"But look there," said the other skater, "who's that crossing from the shore to the island? I declare, two, three of 'em. Bill's going to have more company than just us two."

Frank was surprised himself to discover the moving figures. They seemed to be endeavoring to advance with more or less caution, as though desirous of coming upon the camper without any notice.

"A set of tramps meaning to gobble poor old Bill's camp, and capture anything he's got," muttered Lanky, as the two boys skated quietly behind an outlying spur of the island, where they too could advance without being noticed.

"Hold on, apparently you didn't notice all I did," said Frank, in a low but earnest tone.

"Meaning what?" demanded his comrade, eagerly.

"Why those three chaps were dressed in uniform; and unless my eyes deceive me in this moonlight the big fellow in the lead had a mighty familiar look, Lanky."

"You don't mean Chief Hogg?" exclaimed the one addressed, in rising alarm.

"Just the one I did mean. I'm almost sure it was our old friend," replied Frank.

"But what could he want up here, and with our pard, Bill?"

"Wait and we'll see, that's all," came from Frank, as they kept on silently advancing so as to come upon the fire.

"Say, what did I tell you about a warning in my bones? There's something going to happen that ain't on the bills, though it may be on this Bill," groaned Lanky.

"Keep still, now; we're nearly there. Creep up behind this clump of bushes at the point, and let's see the show," whispered Frank.

In another minute they had drawn close enough to easily see the tramp. He was sitting there looking into the heart of the blazing fire; and Frank imagined that Bill seemed rather glum, as though his thoughts were not very happy ones.

"Look at the bushes just back of him—something moving there. What did I tell you? It's Chief Hogg, and he's coming out," whispered Frank.

"With two of his men in tow. Oh! what has Bill been doing? I hope nothing serious, nothing to get him trouble just when things look rosy for the poor chap."

"H'sh!" was hissed into Lanky's ear.

Bill sprang up a few seconds later. He looked with some surprise at the three uniformed men so near by; but Frank noticed that the tramp did not seem to be at all alarmed at his situation.

"Don't try to get away, you!" said the big officer, threateningly.

At this Bill laughed harshly.

"I'm not likely to, mister. Come and sit down beside my blaze. Glad you dropped in on me. Must have known I wanted a little help just about now."

Chief Hogg walked straight up to the tramp and looked in his face. He even put out his hand and felt of the straggly beard as if desirous of making sure that it was genuine, and not assumed.

"Taint him, Whalen! That imp Lef Seller done us up when he sent us on this fools' errand," he remarked, vigorously, turning to one of his companions.

"But we want to make sure. They say that Bill Brockholt's a crafty cove, all right," declared one of the minions of the law, suspiciously.

"Well, say, he's only been out of the stone jug a couple of days, and this critter's got a beard that's been growing some months. No, 'taint the Bill we want," and the stout chief shook his head in disgust as he contemplated the two mile return trip.

"But we might as well grab this feller on some

charge, after all our trouble. Just think up something or other, Chief. Never like to come in empty-handed, after startin' out for game," persisted the other officer, stepping around so as to cut off any possible flight, should the tramp dream of attempting it.

Frank nudged his chum.

"Come on; now's the time to say a good word for Bill," he remarked.

Upon which the two boys showed themselves.

"Hello! Chief!" cried Frank, cheerily, as he skated ashore, and advanced near the campfire of the tramp.

"Why, if it ain't Frank Allen! What's the good word, my boy?" asked the stout official, who regarded Frank as the finest boy in all Columbia.

"We've been up-country at the new Baxter farm, and had the pleasure of helping to put a fire started by the very rascal you're looking for, Bill Brockholt. Not only that, but we helped chase after him until he dropped the clothes he was carrying off to make use of in changing from his striped convict suit. He was just what they described him in that circular, a foot shorter than this man, and with a smooth face."

Bill had stepped forward while Frank was talking, and the boy, who had purposely mentioned that name, saw the start he gave.

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He nudged Lanky in the ribs again, as if to say: "It's all right; this is the Bill you're looking for; he gave himself away that time!"

"Too bad you didn't get him, Frank, you're so lucky in all such things. But you must tell me all the particulars. There's a reward out for Brockholt, and some of us want to claim it," observed the police officer.

"Hey, Chief!" sang out Whalen at this juncture, "come here and take a look in his old shack! Told you he must have some pal along with him. Perhaps there is a whole gang afloat here."

Frank, looking quickly at the other, saw Bill smile broadly. He knew from this that the tramp was not trembling in fear.

"I just got a poor feller in there, Chief, that turned up cold, and wanting lodgin's. Stir him up, mister, and pull him out here," observed Bill, mysteriously.

Whalen vanished within the shack. They could hear him speaking, and gruff tones in reply. Then out came the officer, dragging a figure after him.

"Why, he's tied up as neat as you please!" exclaimed Chief Hogg.

"Course he is. They told me Bill was a desperate man, and I didn't want to take chances," replied the tramp, calmly.

"It's sure Bill Brockholt!" ejaculated Whalen, bending over the prisoner.

Frank had guessed this already, and he felt like throwing up his cap with delight. Willie, the returned wanderer, had indeed vindicated himself in the eye of the law.

Lanky rushed up to the tall tramp and grasped his hand.

"Bully for you, Willie!" he cried, exultantly, "that's the time you did it! I've been just cracking my brain to remember where I saw you. And it just burst in on me when we were up at the farm. You're wanted there, Willie, and wanted bad. Just you get moving in the morning, and fill in the gap where you belong!"

The other shook his head sadly.

"I reckon you don't just know why I left home, Lanky," he said, mournfully.

"Oh! but we do though; and that long-lost pocketbook has been found!" cried Lanky.

"That's good news you're telling me, boy!" burst out in hoarse tones from the tramp; while Chief Hogg and his assistants looked up from examining the prisoner to gaze more critically at the speaker, as a suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon their minds.

"My chum here found it back of the lower drawer in the old man's desk. My! but your father was

staggered. He just sat there and groaned as he looked at it, and wished he could only see you again to make it all up. We didn't tell him, because we wanted to make sure it was you. But take my advise, Bill, and skip up there in the morning the first thing. Sure there'll be a warm welcome for you."

"I'll do it, Lanky, and a thousand thanks to you and Frank Allen for bringing me this good news. I won't sleep a wink to-night; but it'll be happiness that keeps me awake, not grieving. Shake hands with me both of you. I'll never forget it, never!"

Neither of the boys at that moment regretted the additional effort they put forth in order to carry the happy news to the outcast of Rattail Island. He looked supremely overjoyed as he squeezed their hands.

"Tell us about this here cove, Bill; how did you happen to lay hands on him." asked Chief Hogg, at this juncture.

"Oh! he dropped into my camp a little while back, and wanted to run things just as he pleased. But you see, the boys had posted me about his ways, and watching my chance I nabbed the gentleman, and tied him up, thinkin' of that nice little reward that would be coming to me," answered Bill; while the man on the ground said a few things not at all complimentary to his captor.

"It looks like he made a haul of clothes somewhere," remarked Frank; for Brockholt certainly was not wearing the suspicious striped suit which he had on at the time of the late pursuit.

"Yes, and they're a mile too big for him too," grinned Officer Whalen.

"Untie his hands, and let me fasten him with steel bracelets," remarked the Chief; which kind attention had to be forced upon the culprit, who seemed to have no appreciation of the shining articles with which these others insisted upon decorating his wrists.

They soon took him away, and when their voices had died out in the distance, the two boys sat down alongside the newly-revived fire. Willie Baxter was anxious to hear all the particulars connected with the finding of the lost pocketbook.

Between them Frank and Lanky told the story, the latter supplying all particulars which the modest participant would have omitted could he have done so.

"Ain't sorry you came along with me, Frank?" asked his chum, later on, when they had said good-night to Bill, and were skating rather stiffly down the Harrapin.

"Not a bit of it. That has just been a great treat to me. I reckon Bill Baxter is about the happiest fellow in the county to-night. And just think of

what will happen when he shows up there tomorrow! I'm glad you gave him another dollar besides what I had along with me. He wants to go to town and get spruced up a bit, have his beard taken off, and get a few duds. And Bill declares he'll pay every cent of the loan back out of that three hundred coming to him," replied Frank.

"I was just trying to imagine how Dora would feel when she knows that I had a hand in bringing the wandering Willie home," mused Lanky.

"Oh!" laughed Frank, "I guess you've feathered your nest there, my boy!"

CHAPTER XXII

SURPRISING CLIFFORD

"THERE comes the Clifford team, fellows!"

"Give 'em a cheer to warm up their hearts, and let 'em know we look to winding up the best year the old school ever had with a victory over Clifford. Now, every one with a hearty will!"

Herman Hooker, the "greatest yeller Columbia High had ever known," waved his big megaphone as a drum major might his baton, and from more than five-score throats there rolled forth in concert the stirring school slogan:

"Ho! ho! ho! hi! hi! hi! *veni! vidi! vici!* we came, we saw, we conquered! Columbia! Rah!"

The fine weather still hung on, though indications pointed to snow before another night. And the ice above Rattail Island was in good shape for the battle of hockey sticks that had been scheduled for this, the second morning after Christmas.

Clifford had her team on the ground, and they had been showing how lively and expert they could be, somewhat to the uneasiness of Helen Allen,

Minnie Cuthbert and some of the other girls of Columbia High. They happened to be close to a bevy of the Clifford faithful, and heard the encouraging cries that continually broke forth as some skater performed an unusually fine maneuver on the ice.

And they had reason for feeling chilling doubts. Clifford had been unbeaten in hockey up to now. With almost ridiculous ease the wonderful seven from up-river had carried off all honors each successive winter, until it seemed as though it were utterly useless hoping to defeat them.

No wonder then that the boys and girls coming from the upper town were filled with enthusiasm and confidence.

"Why, girls, it's simply going to be another walk-over!" laughed a pretty miss who carried the colors of Clifford upon her bosom, as she proudly flaunted a flag of the same stripe.

"A case of 'Alexander with ten thousand men, went up the Alps and down again!'" mocked a second enthusiast, smiling at Frank's sister.

"Time will tell, Susie," answered Helen, trying to appear quite satisfied; but she knew the chances were very much against Frank and his team.

It was wonderful, though, what dependance all those fellows of Columbia High were putting in the presence of Frank Allen on the team.

"Frank hasn't been beaten once this year!" they kept repeating; and the fact seemed to give them astonishing confidence.

"All right," replied one of the Clifford backers, "this is just where he gets his bumps then."

"Yes," called out another, "from to-day this will be called the Harrapin Field of Waterloo, because your Young Napoleon met his first great defeat here."

"The boys haven't got over the bitter pill he rubbed in last summer and fall, when his crowd drew the prizes in baseball, rowing and football games. Oh! you poor Columbias, you're up against it hard to-day!" came from a third rooter.

There seemed to be thousands of spectators present, for a close game was expected, even though the chances were five to one in favor of the unbeaten Clifford Seven. Of course most of these people were wise enough to find places on the two rising banks of the river; for they distrusted the ice; and if it ever broke with that crowd on it the result would be a tragedy.

Still hundreds skated hither and thither, waiting for the great game to begin. Already those in charge were marking off the field, the spot where the ice promised best results having been selected.

Hastings and Allen, as the respective captains of the rival teams, were talking certain matters over;

while a group of players clustered around them, eagerly drinking in all that was said.

Hastings was not so confident of an easy victory as many others. He had been up against Frank Allen on several occasions, and knew something of the manner in which the Columbia High School leader inspired his men with a portion of his own amazing zeal, and unconquerable spirit.

After leaving Frank he gathered his players around him for a last few instructions; and it could be seen that he was laying down the law with unusual vim.

"Say, Bob Hastings ain't getting cold feet already, is he?" shouted a Columbia student at a Clifford fellow perched on an adjacent knob, where he had a splendid view of the shifting panorama on the broad river.

"It'd be the first time ever then, if he did!" called the other; "this is our game, Prentiss, and we know it from A to Izzard. Your fellows will know more about hockey when we get through with them than they ever knew before. See?"

"Well, somebody's in for a surprise, then," remarked the first speaker, with a shake of his head.

"They're getting ready to play!" announced another looker-on," and you fellows want to button up so we can hear what goes on."

The spectators were being shoved back so as to

leave the space free that was absolutely necessary for the playing of the winter game.

"It's the same old seven, not a break!" shouted a voice, as the Clifford players took their allotted places facing the enemy's goal.

And as the rival teams faced each other those who looked on saw that the line-up was as follows:

<i>Clifford.</i>	<i>Columbia.</i>
McQuirk Goal.....	West
Hastings Point.....	Shaddock
Gentle Cover Point.....	Comfort
Coots Center.....	Allen
Adkins Rover.....	Wallace
Style Left Wing.....	Bird
Wentworth Right Wing.....	Shay

As substitute Clifford had Hollingsworth first, while Columbia passed up Oakes.

All was as still as death while the two teams faced each other, and the chosen referee addressed a few general directions to the players concerning certain rules that had been changed somewhat from last season.

"Now, get busy, fellows!" chirped a high-pitched voice from the hillside, and which clarion call created a ripple of amusement, destined however to be quickly stilled.

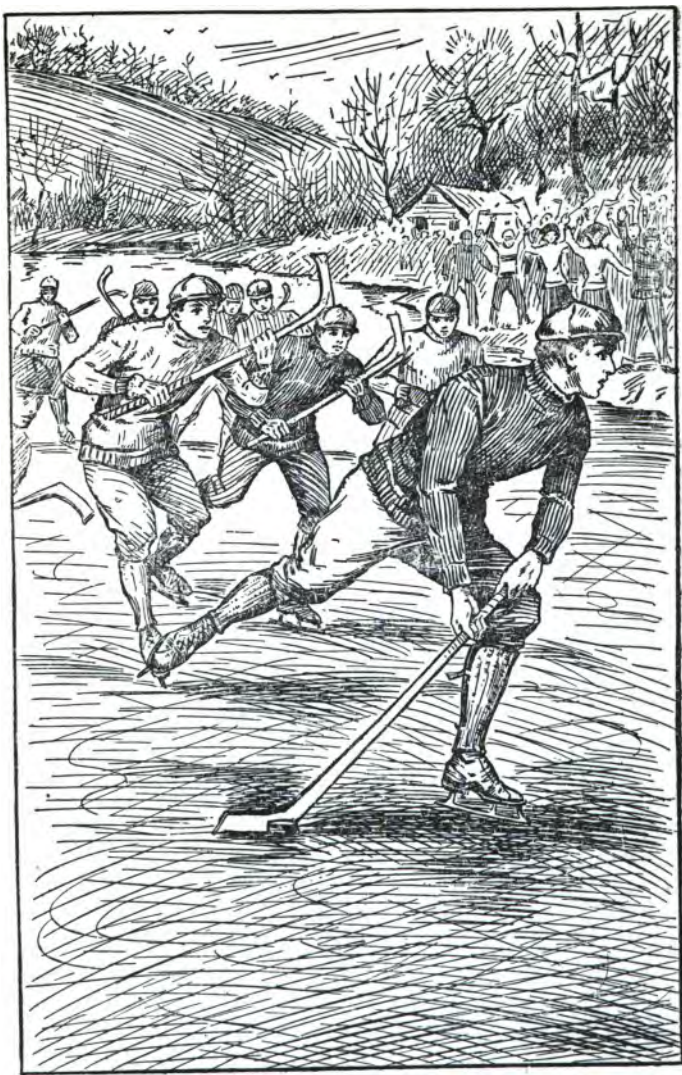
"Play!" came in the referee's commanding tones.

Instantly all was commotion. Every fellow seemed to start up as if on springs, and it was indeed a pretty sight to see all those colored jerseys beginning to flit hither and thither over the ice, each young athlete ready to exert himself to the limit in order to accomplish the task falling to his hand.

Hockey sticks circled through the air, or were held in readiness for a stroke, as those whose hands gripped the same darted down toward the inoffensive puck, with hostile intent.

Frank had found himself opposed to Coots in the start as the puck was "faced," with the shoe of a hockey stick on either side. Coots had quite a reputation as a crack beginner. He could get possession of the rubber disc better than any other player among the Cliffords; and hence it was usually Coots who led off whenever the puck had to be faced, which might frequently occur during the game.

This had always given his side a great advantage, and was one of the reasons for their astonishing success. Frank had sized the situation up. If he could not hold his own in connection with this wizard, he meant to try Lanky and see how he would pan out. Much depended on their being able to get their share of starts.



"FRANK HOOKED IT AWAY FROM HIM!"

—Page 215

Boys of Columbia High on the Ice.

Perhaps Coots was a little over-confident in the initial performance. He had had such an easy time of it in past performances that he may have grown a shade careless, as the best of players will.

"Frank hooked it away from him! See him go, will you? Hey! Clifford, what's the matter with that for a beginning? Wow! what a scramble!" shouted Buster Billings.

"But there's the left wing cornered Allen! Watch him get it from him!" answered a faithful Clifford rooter.

"Will he—maybe, maybe not!" quoth Jack Eastwick, as Frank, rightly gauging the downward swoop of Gentle, sent the puck over to Lanky Wallace at just the very last second.

The tall rover was off with it in charge like a lightning express train, and the entire bunch, as it seemed, trailing behind. Straight at the goal he swung, made a feint that had the agile McQuirk on pins and needles, and before the defender of the Clifford goal could recover from his surprise, Lanky, with a cracking shot, sent the rubber disc spinning into the net.

Then pandemonium seemed to break loose! Certainly never before since the red Indians roved the heavily-wooded banks of the picturesque Har-rapin, had such a confusion of whoops and shouts sounded in that shallow valley.

Herman Hooker was of course the worst offender. He paraded up and down before his cheer corps, waving his arms like a crazy being, and leading the volume of sound that rolled up and down the river like a mighty battle cry of old.

And yet when the confusion that followed the making of the first goal had once more given way to another alignment of forces on the ice, these sounds immediately ceased as if by magic. Every eye was glued on the crouching figures of those fourteen young athletes. Columbia hearts beat faster than ever with new hopes; while the Clifford enthusiasts simply bit their lips and smiled.

"That's just to coax 'em on a little. It encourages the boys some. Our fellows are a bit stale walking over everything, so they want to make it look interesting," said Buster's up-river friend in his ear.

The fat boy simply turned and grinned in his face; but all he said was just the one suggestive word:

"So!"

Again play was resumed. This time Coots was on his mettle. He had had one taste of Frank's clever tactics, and realized that unless he wished to step down from his high pedestal he would have to brace up, and be doing something to redeem that first fizzle.

Consequently he played like a demon to get possession of the puck, with the result that he managed to work one of his old tricks that gave him the desired opportunity to run away with the prize. But "once bit, twice shy," with Frank; and Coots would not be apt to spring that same little surprise again on Columbia's center.

Down the river surged the tide of battle, back and forth as the minutes passed. The movements were oftentimes so surprisingly rapid that many of those who looked on were in a maze, and unable to decide just where the flying puck might be. Indeed, they quickly learned that the easiest method of determining this was by watching the rush of the players, whose eyes were especially trained to keep tab on the little elusive disc of hard rubber.

Loud above all other sounds came the shrill whistle of the referee as again and again he called a halt in the play to admonish some daring player that he was overstepping the lines, and carrying his enthusiasm too far beyond the limits set by the rules.

Frank beat Coots out the third time the puck was faced. He had a few little adroit measures of his own which Coots did not seem to know. It began to look as though this might be a battle of giants with those two keen-witted and swift-handed fellows to start things moving each time.

Confidence was shown in all the actions of those

who backed Frank up in the play. Whatever they may have privately thought about these wonderful Clifford players, they no longer *feared* them. That winning of the first goal had told each Columbia fellow that Clifford was vulnerable, and they believed that Frank had found the weak spot in their armor.

Coots had gone stale! He was no longer the wonder of the past. When Frank took the puck from him for the third time the crowd on the banks, at least that part of it coming from up-river, fairly groaned.

"What's the matter with Coots?" was asked everywhere.

"He's off his play, and must be sick!" others said.

"Hastings had better change around and face himself, then, before it's too late. Coots has lost his grip, sure!"

"Rats!" jeered Buster Billings, derisively; "don't you believe it a minute. Coots is as good as ever he was. The trouble is he's now up against his hoodoo. It ain't 'what's the matter with Coots?' but 'how about Allen!' See?"

Again was the goal of Clifford in peril. The enemy had shoved down until it was only necessary to shoot the puck past the guard of McQuirk again to score.

"Brace up, you Clifford! Show us the old spirit!" howled an excitable man, who was walking up and down the bank, unable to keep still.

"That's Rockledge, one of the Clifford High teachers, and the man who coached their football squad. He's a Yale man!" said some one near Helen Allen; but she only gave the party one quick look, for her whole heart and soul just then seemed to be wrapped up in the work of her beloved brother; nor was her great chum Minnie one whit behind in showing the deepest interest.

McQuirk was on the alert, and his reputation as a defender of goal was well known. Although Lanky tried another little game he found himself up against a stone wall that time, and the disc was brushed away from the net. Once more there was a wild rush and a scramble, in which various sticks flashed through the air, and many a punch and blow were wasted.

Then, through the *melée*, came Paul Bird speedily heading for the Clifford goal, and dribbling the disputed puck before him. Constantly his eyes roved to left and right as he sped onward, and apparently he was ready to strike for a goal if threatening peril forced him hard, although desirous of getting a closer shot.

Here was a new adversary for the defender of the net to face, and one whose tactics must of neces-

sity be entirely different from those of the rover.

Every one held his or her breath. In that critical moment the keen cutting of steel runners on the ice alone greeted the ears of that assembled multitude. And thousands of eyes were glued upon that flitting figure, back of which trailed six or eight players, some ready to assist, others to block his design.

It was nearly time for the first half to come to an end. The contestants were already breathing hard, and almost exhausted with their strenuous labors of twenty minutes. Would Paul succeed in launching a shot that the waiting McQuirk could not baffle in time, or must the whistle catch him in the very act!

"There he goes!" whispered Buster, gripping his fat thighs unconsciously as he bent forward to watch the result.

Darting forward suddenly Paul Bird had made a complicated movement with his stick calculated to bewilder the guardian of the net. Then with one swift stroke he sent the puck spinning along.

"Missed!" howled a delighted Cliffordite.

"Not for Joseph!" echoed Buster instantly "don't you see it landed in the net?"

And then the whistle of the referee announced the closing of the first half.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GREAT VICTORY—CONCLUSION

DURING the ten-minute intermission there was the wildest sort of excitement all through the crowds of spectators. Of course the Columbia backers were wrought up into almost hysterical delight. They had hoped to hold their own, but the fact that their team had scored two goals to Clifford's none was almost too good to be true. Clifford stock took a great tumble about then. All they were hoping for now was a tie.

Lef Seller, who had been openly boasting of what would happen to Columbia, found himself in a fight with an indignant and disgusted fellow student, who accused him of rank treachery. They kept at it, hammer and tongs, until Chief Hogg drew the attention of the sheriff to this infraction of the peace of the community, with the result that the two fellows with discolored optics were carried off to cool in the Columbia lock-up until their fathers could come to the rescue.

"Time's up! There they go back to work! Now Clifford *do* something! Get together, boys, and give them some encouragement," and with that the cheer squad from up the river started a song that had in times past inspired their athletes to deeds of valor.

"They need some sort of tonic," jeered Buster, comfortably; "for what Frank Allen and his husky fellows are doing to them this day is a shame!"

It could be seen that Hastings had made a slight change, substituting Hollingsworth for McQuirk, who had showed signs of being rattled in his defense of the net. As for Columbia, there was not a face missing, from Frank all down along the line. And a more determined lot of young athletes certainly never faced one another than those hockey players from the rival schools along the Harrapin.

Hastings had also determined on another change. He now stood up to open play in place of Coots, who had failed to hold Frank more than a third of the time. But it was Lanky Wallace who toed the mark there with the captain of the Clifford seven; for Frank believed it good policy to also make a change, since the enemy must by now be getting familiar with his various dodges to gain possession of the puck.

Lanky was a swift dodger, and could evade being caught in a pinch better than any other of the

Columbia boys. He could also hold possession of the puck in a way little short of marvelous, now dribbling it along foot by foot, watching in every direction for an aggressive play, and then tantalizingly shoving it forward as if to bait the enemy, only to send it flying off when a hostile move was made.

Hastings lost the first set-to with Lanky. His men, however, were now worked up to top-notch speed. They who had never as yet tasted of defeat in hockey were now being apparently put in a hole by the despised Columbia High Seven. It could be seen that they fought wickedly to get the advantage.

Many times the game was called while the referee warned some of the eager participants against reckless work. Sometimes it was one of Frank's men thus taken to task; but three to one it was a Clifford player; for in their furious efforts these fellows were continually getting offside, and even fouling.

It took over ten minutes for a goal to be shot. Then it was Clifford that gained the point; but as their friends admitted, it had been the hardest fought goal that ever came to them.

Of course Clifford colors waved frantically after this goal had been won; but the Columbia cheers sounded above any noise the up-river people could evoke. It seemed a battle of giants, and was the

finest thing they had ever seen, no matter which side eventually won.

Once more the battle was on, with Hastings getting the puck, and running with it ten yards and more before he had to shoot it ahead. Away flew the sprinters like the wind, rounding up with a furious swirl as they headed off the spinning rubber, and the hockey sticks got busy with their work.

Every one in the scrimmage did gallant work. When the roll of heroes was made up at the end of the fight not a single name could be left out. There were times when each member of both teams had his turn, and many surprising and bewildering plays were worked with a celerity that called forth involuntary cheers from the gaping crowds, irrespective of which school profited from the wonderful maneuvering.

When fifteen minutes of the second half had gone a tremendous whirlwind of cheers announced that Columbia had managed to get past the able defense of Hollingsworth, and planted the puck in the net of the enemy.

Three to one! And only five minutes more for play!

No wonder Columbia stock went soaring at this point; and that each player under Frank's able lead made up his mind to hold this advantage to the end. The up-river fellows were wild with eagerness to

get the puck in motion, for every second lost counted with them now. Columbia on the other hand, seemed in no hurry, though of course they did not purposely try to delay the game.

When play had once more started the pace of Clifford was indeed furious. Each member of her team seemed to be possessed with a fire that could not be held in check. But on the other hand the Columbia fellows did everything in their power to hold the puck away from their goal, and many were the magnificent dashes intended to delay matters.

In two minutes the tide of battle had been carried so far that Hastings himself shot the disc for the net. Ralph West, to be known under his new name of Langworthy from this time forth, stood there as the guardian of the interests of his school. And never was a trust more worthily defended.

The puck came flying at him with furious speed; he dared not interpose a part of his body lest he be taken to task by the watchful referee, and a forfeit paid in the way of a goal. So it became necessary that he use his hockey stick to advantage in the breach.

Then it was that the sure eye that had never failed Ralph in his position on the baseball nine, and with his football comrades, came into play. He interposed his stick with such faithful accuracy that the puck was brought to a sudden halt, even as

it was about to shoot into the net. Then came a swift stroke that sent it caroming over the ice, full fifty feet away, with a horde of eager skaters in pursuit.

"All over!" shouted Buster, standing on his toes to see the finish.

"All but the shouting!" echoed Jack Eastwick; for well did they know that when that swift shot of Hastings headed for the Columbia net it was high water mark in the Clifford advance.

And true enough, the heart seemed to be quite taken from the Clifford seven after that failure of Hastings to make good. They fought on doggedly, but lacked the vim and fire that they had so recently been showing. With but two minutes left it was utterly out of the question to dream of making the twin goals necessary to tie the score, let alone enough to win out.

And presently the referee's whistle signified that the match had reached its legitimate conclusion!

Columbia High had finished her most remarkable year in a blaze of glory! Everything had indeed come her way that season, and it would long remain as the most wonderful in all the history of the famous institution.

Cheers immediately arose, and let it be said to the honor of Columbia that the very first her sons and daughters put up were in honor of the gallant

Clifford team. Beaten they might be, and for the first time in their history; but there was not an atom of disgrace attached to such a defeat.

And that night it snowed—yes, fully a foot of the feathery stuff came down ere it cleared again; and every fellow along the Harrapin declared that even the weather had been in the conspiracy with Columbia that year, since the storm held off until the last stirring victory had been honorably won.

But though Frank Allen had led his comrades upon so many victorious fields was no reason to believe that there would not appear other valorous athletes in good old Columbia when he was far away in college, earning his sheepskin. So long as that spirit reigned so long would new leaders arise to carry the dearly-loved orange and purple to the front, when rival schools sent their best to try conclusions with the boys of Columbia High.

Columbia High still moves majestically on year after year, turning out her graduating class of thirty-odd young people, and receiving twice as many from the ranks of lower-graded schools. Professor Parke is still in charge, and even honest old "Soggy" looks after the custody of the buildings as of yore, while Mrs. Loudon caters to the appetites of the hungry hordes at intermission.

After those Christmas holidays Lef Seller gave our friends no more trouble. That last disgrace,

when he was arrested for brawling, and locked up for three hours in the town headquarters, seemed to be the last straw on the camel's back, so far as his father was concerned.

When Lef failed to return to school, inquiry developed the fact that he had been sent away to a strict military establishment, where it was hoped that he might be disciplined until perhaps he would see his duty toward the father who had always been too indulgent toward him.

Columbia High did not weep, for while there were a few who would miss the leadership of the scapegrace Lef, the balance of the community could heave a sigh of relief. Many a time had his escapades set the entire town in a whirl; and the citizens only hoped it would be a long period ere his equal arose.

Lanky of course, took occasion the very afternoon of the victory over Clifford, to skate up to the Baxter farm in order, as he claimed, to make sure that the long-missing "Willie" was once again restored to the bosom of his family.

He found a happy group, and Bill was already showing an intense interest in the new farm, which he expected to help his father run. And the rosy-cheeked Dora no doubted thanked Lanky for the part he had taken in the restoration of her brother. At any rate, Lanky lingered so long that the storm broke and they would not allow him to start home.

So he spent two very delightful days up at Baxter's. He, too, seemed to take quite an interest in the farm, as though he contemplated changing his avowed future vocation from that of a lawyer to a tiller of the soil.

Ralph was now known by his new name. His mother purchased a lovely home adjoining Columbia, and Ralph for the first time in all his tempestuous life knew what it was to have such an abiding-place. Of course he and Frank Allen would always be the best of chums; and Frank's pretty sister was a loadstone that frequently drew young Langworthy to the Allen house. Then there were Lanky and Paul, who shared the fond regard of the others—the time would come doubtless when these boys might find themselves scattered far and wide, in the various business pursuits that must occupy their attention after they reached man's estate; but they would never, never forget those glorious days when they fought upon many a stubbornly contested field for the honor of good old Columbia High.

THE END.



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